
LET US NOT SIMPLY CALL OURSELVES “DOMINICANS,” BUT RATHER LET US ACTUALLY BE “PREACHERS”

By Fr. Jerry Stookey, O.P.

[Editor's note: The following was a presentation by Fr. Stookey, former Promoter General, to the International Congress of Lay Dominican Fraternities at the Cenaculo Retreat Center, Pilar, Argentina, March 18, 2007.]

Good morning, preachers! Thank you for coming to Argentina to attend this International Congress of Lay Dominican Fraternities! I know that everyone has made a great sacrifice just to get ready for the Congress and just to be here today.

How is your preaching going? That is the question that all of us Dominicans should ask ourselves regularly and at the beginning of each new day. So, at the beginning of our Congress, whose theme is “Lay Dominicans: Companions in Preaching,” let us ask ourselves right now: “How is our preaching doing?”

I imagine we could spend the entire week here just listening to each other's answers to this challenging inquiry about our preaching. We would have each one take a turn and tell us what it means FOR YOU to be a preacher personally. Surely each one's report would include a lot about TO WHOM you preach or WHAT message it is that you most often preach to them. As modern disciples, we would have to answer Jesus question of us today: Who do YOU say that I am—and especially do you say it to others? How do you personally communicate the Word of God to others?

I imagine that from some of you we would hear stories of how difficult it

is to preach to certain individuals or how hard it is to give testimony to God in adversary circumstances. Many in this room would share remarkable stories of what they have already suffered in this life because of their faith in the Crucified and Risen Lord. And yes, so many of us would get the opportunity to tell our greatest success stories as preachers and how we really celebrated the Living Word of God with some others who needed to hear it and who actually responded when they heard it.

The Central Identity of Preacher

Personally, I think every Dominican individual and group should frequently ask how their preaching is going. All our lives and mission should be seen in relation to the Holy Preaching, and we should develop a deep self-identity by calling ourselves PREACHERS. Do you wake up in the morning asking yourself, “How can I help spread the Word of God today?”

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God's love where I will be working today?

- A Lay Dominican might say to himself, “I need to be a better Christian example here in my neighborhood.”
- A Lay Dominican Chapter or Fraternity could discuss having a community preaching project together.

I believe every Dominican priory, monastery, convent, fraternity, or group should evaluate its entire life and mission in relationship to the Preaching. All of us ought to include a report on our preaching in every one of our meetings!

The Master's recent letter on the Preparation of the 800th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Nuns reminded me of the Second Vatican Council's calling us back to our roots and original preaching charism. As Fr. Carlos wrote, “Let us walk faithful to the love we had at first.” Are we faithful to that first love we felt when we began to know Christ and when we first began to walk in the way of the preachers? Let's go back to what we always have been and are still supposed to be: PREACHERS!

As the Letter to the Romans (10:14) asks: “How will they hear without a preacher?” How will there be any preaching, unless people are sent and actually go out and preach? And how would anyone go out and preach until they know what they believe, and they clearly identify themselves as a preacher. And then, wise as

serpents (Mt. 10:16) we must go out and find a myriad of ways to preach.

Other-Directed Mission

It is true that one cannot give what one does not have. And likewise it is true that if we who “have” preaching or who ARE preachers and call ourselves an Order of Preachers, then we ought to give what we do have! Go preach! Timothy Radcliffe has often emphasized that we Dominicans are essentially MISSIONARIES, perhaps the very first truly missionary religious order of the Church. So being a Dominican preacher is not something for OURSELVES or a vocation for saving our own souls, although that will hopefully be the result at the end. Rather, being a Dominican preacher is for OTHERS, directed outward in mission. Not self-centered, in but other-directed.

To truly celebrate our 800th anniversary, I suggest we emphasize our being a religious “Order of Preachers” just as much as we have emphasized being “Dominicans” in recent history. That is, the love we had at first was not about being followers of Dominic de Guzman, but above all followers of Jesus Christ. When the Order of Preachers first began to walk faithfully, we might equally have been called “Diegans” instead of “Dominicans” because it was Bishop Diego of Osma who initially led the preaching project, as our Dominican historian Sr. Barbara Beaumont has stated.

Too often, being “Dominicans” is folkloric in a way (although I do not mean to put down our wonderful traditions of black and white, and cute dogs with torches!). But what is rather essential is being an Order of PREACHERS, not just “Dominicans.” We Dominicans run the same risk that a lot of Catholics face, namely,

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we could almost completely forget the initial project, the love we believers had at first, or the original message of God’s love for all which Jesus preached. Instead, we could simply focus on the cultural beauty of being a Christian or a Dominican. We end up DEVOTIONAL Christians and Dominicans, but not very deeply VOCATIONAL preachers, like Jesus and Dominic were! In fact, the word “Dominican,” as lovely as it is, helps keep us inactive, keeps us neutral, allows us to focus on ME being one. But the word “Preacher” is very active; it cannot be used as a simple identity but rather signifies that I must be preaching to OTHERS and not just to myself. So like Jesus and his follower Dominic de Guzman, we no longer live for ourselves but for HIM and for OTHERS.

New International Commission

So, thank God, the Order of Preachers has formed a new International Commission on Preaching, which includes men and women preachers from different branches of our Family. May they assist us during

the Jubilee Anniversary in repeatedly asking the daily perennial question, “How is our preaching doing?”

There is an urgency of the Gospel being preached that we cannot afford to ignore. As Ruben reminded us in his reflection at Morning Prayer, the world is full of suffering and many needs. You might say, the world is waiting for us preachers. But will the preachers be sent? How will the world ever hear, if there is no one prepared and sent to preach?

Many in the world do not know or believe in Jesus the Christ. Still many more who have heard of him or even profess to follow him do not believe in what he preached. Jesus went out of his way to tell the synagogue and the whole world that God is love, that all people are created in love by God, and that all God’s creatures are loved by God. Every human on planet Earth is your brother or sister! And this is the preaching that does justice. Not justice as if it was a political campaign or a workers’ union or an ideology. But Biblical justice, which defends the equal rights of every person: they are your brothers and sisters, whether you like them or not, and they are loved by God, even if others do not love them, and ALL people are children of God as Jesus preached, especially those whom we love to exclude and hate: widows, orphans, lepers, the sick, women and children,

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But this is the preaching that also makes peace. Not peace as if it was a political solution or a pacifist movement or a philosophy. But Biblical peace that means love and compassion even for our enemies. In Christ you cannot kill your enemy. When we are in Christ, murder is really fratricide, for every time one is killed it is your brother or sister that is being killed. Of course, we have enemies and evil people do exist. But they are our brothers and sisters who are mistaken and only our love, compassion, forgiveness, and hard prayer and preaching might bring them to conversion. Peace and justice are the

preachers basic message of Christ: God loves all people equally and they are all your brothers and sisters as children of God, and therefore you may not kill any of them, not even your enemies.

A Community Ministry

I don't think the world hears this message or that we preach it clear enough. It is a difficult task to be a faithful preacher. It requires companions. Do not attempt to preach alone! There is no such thing as a lone Dominican—we are the company of preachers, the companions in preaching, a community and Family of Preachers. It takes prayer companions to do this. It requires classmates

or colleagues with whom to study and learn. It will need support and fraternal correction and organization, for the world is NOT naïve about organizing against the message of God's love. Even Jesus commented on this: How can the enemies and evildoers be so good at their wickedness and be so skilled at doing harm, while we faithful preachers do not get our act together, remain disorganized and unprepared! Jesus pushed his disciples to ORGANIZE, not AGONIZE!

And all of this is the work of this Congress, so that we might be more effective, faithful PREACHERS to the world, in the manner of Saint Dominic. 

Untitled in Autumn

From where does it come—the sky's water
And how does it fall—the eye's water
Which runs off trees and faces?
Can we count leaves as so many trees' tears
And dream (or do we know?)
That all of nature like us knows
A pain it cannot hide?

How are the heavens' brows so gray knit tight!
How are field creatures in sporadic flight
Flitting—
As are the few brave crows from trees
Untenanted by a wind
Who even has cause for woe!

And how a long gray man in Fall rainfall
Dishearted, kicks leaves as so many sins
He should have long forgot
Yet wincing nonetheless!

For all her fallings of rain, or leaves,
And even of sparrow,
Makes nature stand in awful sorrow
Before it's pain, and before the man.

All of man's fallings—of tears, and worse
Leave him to wonder and wish
For caves to sleep in.
And through the man does nature know
The pain it cannot hide.

Yet every fall from grace sees Him upon
The bleak hill
Again the crucified.
And if sin is as inevitable as Autumn
Then he who broods has missed the point—
And staggered, stares at fallen leaves
Missing the tree of life
Which promises even unsuspecting and death-grayed
Earth
Eternal glory.

Did Incarnate God not hang upon a tree?
Only the weak and impious could taste
The mystery of pain.
For his love hallows the most common place of nights.
And all times spent therein are grace-raised
To Gethsemane.

by Richard-Paul LaCorte, O.P., The Enclosed Garden