

# THE FOUR PILLARS OF DOMINICAN LIFE

## DOMINICAN SPIRITUALITY: VOLUME 1

### *What is Dominican Spirituality?*

Dominican spirituality is a way of following Christ that is inspired by the life and spirit of St. Dominic. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to grow in love of God and neighbor. This is more than just a command in the contemporary legal sense; it is an invitation to holiness, and thus, to happiness. God made us to love. We have a natural aptitude for love and when we embrace God's love for us and extend this love to others, we discover true human fulfillment.

But loving God and neighbor takes many forms. There are many paths to God. In following Christ, we are fortunate to have the example of holy men and women who have loved God in manifestly heroic ways. These are the saints. One such person was St. Dominic, and by reflecting on the way in which he followed Christ, we are inspired to grow in the intimate love of God and neighbor.

Now the particular way that Dominicans express love of God and neighbor is to engage in the primary work of the Order: *to preach the gospel for the salvation of souls*. Over the course of nearly eight hundred years, this preaching has been lived out in various cultures and has assumed many forms. But underlying this mission to preach, there are four elements of Dominican life which offer a clear direction for living out St. Dominic's vision. These elements are prayer, study, community and ministry. Traditionally, these four elements are called the "four pillars" of Dominican life because they provide the foundation and support for our lives.



### ELEMENTS OF DOMINICAN PRAYER

Prayer is simply talking to God. Just as there are many ways of conversing with a friend, so too there are various ways in which we pray. Now there are three elements that give shape to Dominican prayer. Dominican prayer is characteristically human, Eucharistic, and contemplative.

First, Dominican prayer is fully human. It is

characteristic for Dominican prayer to combine the activity of body, mind and spirit. From an early Dominican document, we learn of the nine ways of Dominic's private prayer. When Dominic prayed, he would incline profoundly, prostrate his body upon the ground, genuflect, do penance, and raise his arms to heaven. Whether standing, sitting, kneeling, prostrating, or walking, Dominic employed all these as postures when praying. For Dominic, prayer was not just a mental activity or exercise, but an intimate, personal conversation with God which was expressed in the unity of mind and body. This harmonization of body and spirit, this delicate blend of word and gesture, engages the totality of the person in worship.

Second, Dominican prayer is Eucharistic. Early in life, St. Dominic became a Canon Regular, whose chief duty and joy was the communal chant of the liturgy of the hours and the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice. Not only is this the Church's public worship, but it also formed the foundation of Dominic's private prayer. The rhythm of the liturgical chant, the ecstatic love expressed in the great Eucharistic prayer of Jesus' own self-offering – these elements were personally absorbed in St. Dominic's prayer, and they gave shape and power to his solitary contemplative prayer.

Third, Dominican prayer is contemplative. Here it is helpful to recall that everyone is called to be a contemplative. All too often, contemplation is thought of as a form of lofty mystical prayer that can be understood only by those versed in mystical theology. Yet, contemplative prayer is something the ordinary person can experience; it is not just a form of prayer which is reserved only to monks and nuns, and those whose lives are completely dedicated to prayer. Everyone has a vocation, a sacred invitation from God, to be a contemplative.

Perhaps we do not think that we have such a vocation because we misunderstand what contemplation is. Simply speaking, contemplation is the experience of being in God's presence. It is a mutual sharing between friends. In fact, friendship provides a good model for understanding contemplation. We are all called to be friends with God. This is what it means to be a holy, to be a saint. Just as friends enjoy each other merely by being present to each other, so too we are called to live in the presence of God. When we are with friends, we do not necessarily think *about* them, we just delight in being *with* them. So contemplation is not so much "doing" as it is "being present." Just as heaven is the full and direct experience of the face of God, so contemplation is a foretaste of this presence. Thus when we place ourselves in God's presence, the very One who loves us into existence comes alive in us. God, who is always with us, comes to be more fully alive and active in us through our contemplative prayer. Thus all methods and specific ways of prayer are only the beginning. Dominican prayer must move through and beyond them to a personal meeting with God, to a place of encounter where we simply enjoy being in God's presence.

## CONTEMPLATIVE STUDY



The Dominican life is also supported by study. When we think of study, images of boring classrooms or abstract discussions may naturally come to mind. But in the context of Dominican life, study leads to prayer, which inspires the preaching of the gospel. At first, it may be difficult to see the connection between prayer and study – especially if we think of study as a cold, rigorous, academic exercise. In this sense, study is considered to be an obstacle to prayer, which itself is regarded as the pious exercise of the heart.

Yet Dominic regarded study as the activity by which we discover the presence of God’s action in our lives. Discovering this presence in our lives enables us to live in the fresh and liberating perspective of God’s will. Thus the goal of study is not accumulation of facts and figures but sharing in wisdom. Wisdom is the virtue by which we come to view all of our experience in the light of God’s love and mercy.

The two great sources of Dominican study are creation and Scripture. Since each of these is thoroughly imbued with the divine presence, Dominic exhorted his brothers to be fervent in cultivating both the attitude of discovery and the discipline of inquiry. Only a mind so enlightened can direct the heart and keep it moving outward, in love and desire, to God.

For the Dominican, then, study is the point of connection between prayer and ministry. Dominicans study in order to encounter the face of Christ in the Scriptures and in the natural world, an encounter which leads to contemplation. From this contemplation flows our mission to share the love and mercy of Jesus that we have experienced with others. St. Thomas Aquinas puts it well when he notes that the Dominican life is characterized as contemplating and then sharing these fruits of contemplation with others. Thus study leads to holiness of mind. For those inspired by Dominic, we love to study and we study to love.

## COMMUNITY



Community is another integral aspect of Dominican spirituality. A central point in recognizing the value of community for our spiritual life is to recall that God saves individuals through a community. God united himself to a particular community in the old covenant and,

insofar as we are joined to the community of the new covenant – the Church – God comes alive in our life. Our spiritual journey is not just about “Jesus and me.” The relationship that we have with God is mutually connected to our other relationships. We cannot love God without loving others. We cannot properly love others if we do not love God.

Dominican spirituality views the community as a unique place of God's presence in the world. It is through the community that we are inspired, encouraged, admonished and forgiven as we travel on our spiritual journey. God shares his divine gifts with us through the community and it is for this reason that the sacraments are not private instances of God's action in the world, but the power of God coming alive in and for the Church community. This is the reason why the Church is not merely a social group. It is the place where we meet Christ, and it is the place from which we are called to share the Gospel.

In our culture which often places great value in being independent and self-reliant, this spirituality of community calls us to recognize our utter dependence on God and the gifts that we have been given by those around us. Dominican spirituality especially emphasizes community because it reveals the virtue of humble reliance. One particular aspect of this reliance is expressed in community as the place of reconciliation. Traditionally, Dominican preaching is rooted in a sense of our human weaknesses and limitations. Applying a kind of spiritual "Murphy's Law," we can say that those who are able to separate themselves from God and others, will eventually (and perhaps all too often) turn away from love out of selfishness. Thus this spirituality has a deep awareness of sin. Yet, the ultimate focus is not sin, but rather on God's grace. The awareness of our sin is the occasion for highlighting the awesome power and transforming healing power of God's grace. Those who do not realize the extent of their illness do not seek medical help. Understanding our profound need for God's grace in our lives can be a gift of the community. For example, if you are not sure of your failings, just turn and ask a friend! But the community is also the place where we experience the healing touch of the divine physician. When we seek God's mercy (either sacramentally in Confession or personally), when we admit to others that we have harmed them, we are opened to the transforming power of forgiveness. Through the community, relationships are healed and our spirits restored.

## DOMINICAN MINISTRY

The heart of Dominican ministry is preaching. But the Dominican notion of preaching goes beyond liturgical preaching or formal catechesis, because the foundation of preaching the word is preaching by example. Simply put, the way we live our lives is itself a homily. When St. Dominic began to preach, he saw the ineffectiveness of those who preached the gospel of Jesus, but lived contrary to their own preaching. This is why Dominic strove to live a simple life. The poverty that Dominicans profess is not merely a penance, but it is a witness to the simplicity of life and the spiritual goal of our journey. Poverty gives power to preaching.



In our contemporary culture there is a crisis of preaching. When we think of preaching, we can imagine a long, boring homily or perhaps the aggressive preacher who is traveling door to door with Bible in hand. Little wonder that we are not enthused when we are

told that we are all called to preach the Gospel! Yet, preaching the Gospel simply entails communicating the truth and love of Jesus to others. In every era this will look different, and the ways that Dominicans have preached are many. St. Thomas Aquinas preached through his teaching, St. Catherine of Siena through her zeal for uniting divisions and mediating disputes, St. Martin de Porres through his care for the sick, poor and marginalized, and Bartholomew de las Casas by fighting for the rights of the indigenous people of America. In all these examples, we see a harmony of word and action, a balance between preaching and the power of example. This fits with the early Dominican motto, *verbo et exemplo* (by word and example). Thus the Dominican answer to this crisis of preaching is to discover creative ways through which we can both respond to the needs of our day and invite others to experience the power of God that is present in our lives.

What, then, is Dominican spirituality? It is a life is rooted in contemplative prayer, engaged in discovering God's presence in our lives and studying the Word of God, united together in the mercy of God's community, and zealous for preaching the gospel by the witness of our words and deeds. And although this is a lofty ideal, when we strive to live in this way, we are supported in loving God by living in the spirit of St. Dominic.

#### ***POINTS TO PONDER***

1. How do each of these pillars provide support for your life?
2. Which of these pillars could be strengthened?
3. Where do you experience God's presence in your life?
4. How do your relationships lead you to God?
5. How do you invite others to get to know God?

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