



DOMINICAN MOTTOS

DOMINICAN SPIRITUALITY: VOLUME 2

After nearly eight centuries of preaching the gospel, the Dominican Order has remained one Order. Despite varied cultures and circumstances, the Order of Preachers has maintained this unity while also enjoying a rich diversity of gifts. Throughout the history of the Order, there have been different ways to express this diversity-in-unity which are captured in several mottos that the tradition has handed down to us. Understood correctly, these mottos encapsulate the spirit of St. Dominic's zeal for preaching and are like various shafts of light that illumine the spiritual path which we walk with Dominic as we follow in the footsteps of Christ.

Here will focus on three mottos that have enjoyed widespread and perennial popularity. Each of these mottos offers a different insight into the life and wisdom of the Dominican passion for preaching the saving gospel of Jesus. The first motto is simply *veritas* (truth), since truth gives shape not only to Dominican preaching, but also to the Dominican way of life. The second motto is *laudare, benedicere, praedicare* (to praise, to bless, to preach). The insight of this three-fold action invites us to consider how we live out our baptismal gifts in the roles of king, priest, and prophet. Thirdly, *contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere* (to contemplate and to share with others the fruit of one's contemplation) is a common Dominican motto. This wisdom of this saying reveals that we are called to live the gospel both by encountering the intimate presence of God and by sharing this encounter with others according to the gifts which we have received. In this way, these three Dominican mottos are specific ways of describing how we can better strive to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves.

VERITAS

CRISIS OF TRUTH

Before considering the Dominican value of living and preaching the truth, it is helpful to realize that there is a crisis of truth in our culture. Echoing Pilate's two thousand year old question, the lived experience of our society often seems to ask, "What is truth?" There is a widespread notion that truth is often an abstract, empty ideal. In this context, how can those dedicated to truth speak a word to the contemporary culture?



In some ways, this thinking is the intellectual heritage of Enlightenment philosophy. In light of the scientific method (a method which has real scientific value), the truthful eye is that of the detached scientific observer who observes the world coldly, rationally, and skeptically. To be disinterested and objective is the only way to uncover the truth. Thus the truth is nothing more than facts. But the facts of any event are based on the viewpoint of the observer. So if truth is equated with facts, and facts are subject to personal perspective, then truth itself seems to be nothing more than a collection of subjective, personal values. As a result, this idea of truth as something relative only to

my experience can lead to a diminishment of speaking the truth. When the truth is simply subjective, there can be no real falsehood. The difference between a truth and a lie is just a matter of perspective. And as we have probably experienced, any relationship, community, or institution that is based on this relative view of truth inevitably creates a culture that is mistrustful, suspicious, and insecure. Yet as indebted as we are to our culture, this subjective view of the truth cannot be the primary way that we understand seeking the truth as Christians.

THE TRUTH OF CREATION

But even in midst of suspicion and distrust, we intuitively know that the truth is real. The truth is not merely subjective. We do enjoy a real understanding of the world. Further, we expect ourselves and others to communicate this truth without deception. Without thinking we recognize the value of Mark Twain's famous advice: "When in doubt, tell the truth. It will confound your enemies and astound your friends."

Truth is the understanding of the reality of things. And the source of truth is God. This is why we are able to understand creation and grasp the truth. The same God who made the world also created our minds. It is God's world and we are at home in it as God's creatures. Of course sometimes we make mistakes and misunderstand. We may tell lies and wear masks. But the truth is a force greater than error and deceit. As birds were made to fly in the heavens, human beings were made to thrive in the truth. It is our home.

This passion for preaching the truth of creation is at the source of the Dominican Order. St. Dominic founded the Order of Preachers in a time and place where the goodness of creation itself was called into question. Dominic's original preaching mission was to the Albigensians, a religious sect which taught that all material things (including the body) are evil. In the face of this crisis of truth, Dominic preached the goodness of the Creator and value of God's work of creation and redemption. Preaching the truth means that, in the crisis of our own times, we too are called to witness to the goodness of God's handiwork that we find in creation.

THE TRUTH OF THE INCARNATION

The natural creation is not the only source of truth. For God is both the author of creation and also the source of redemption. In the Incarnation, the eternal creator assumes human nature with all its natural limitations. The source of truth takes flesh. So truth is not merely an abstract notion or idea. Truth is a person. In the person of Jesus Christ, the whole of God's truth becomes manifest. For this reason, Jesus sums up his entire mission when he says: "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37). Further, Jesus identifies himself with the truth: "I am the Truth." What is this truth? It is the reality that in the person of Jesus Christ we have access to eternal life. And testifying to this saving news is the mandate of the preacher.

The heart of Dominican spirituality centers on the truth of the Incarnation. St. Dominic founded the Order specifically *to preach for the salvation of souls*. Thus the preacher of truth is not a disinterested, objective observer, but rather a person enflamed with love for God and others. The preacher of truth recognizes both the goodness of creation and the fallen human condition in order that God's healing grace and compassion might be embraced by all. As preachers of truth, we are filled with a sense of wonder for creation, a delight in the world around us, and we humbly recognize the goodness of the God who became flesh so that we might share in his divinity.

PREACHING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

In engaging the contemporary crisis of truth we ought to be careful to avoid becoming reactionary. When truth is relativized, it is too simplistic to assert that truth is objective and that we Christian few confidently possess it. The reality of the matter is somewhere in the middle. As we have seen, truth is not merely subjective, but neither is it an object that we possess. No one owns the truth; we all discover it. And not without some difficulty. Meister Eckhart, a fourteenth-century Dominican, wrote that no one may attain the truth without a hundred errors on the way. Seeking the truth requires times of tentative exploration.

This means that, although we can be confident in the truths of creation and the Incarnation, we must always preach this truth with an attitude of humility. Truth is not the weapon of the preacher, a club with which to bludgeon the ignorant. Truth is a virtue – it is holiness of mind. And just as we do not grow in holiness all at once, so too, truth something that we discover, little by little. And once we experience the truth of reality, we delight in sharing it. The truth sets us free. Thus the wisdom of Dominican spirituality reminds us that the great task of our age is to enliven the imagination, to stir up conversation of heart and to invite all to experience the freedom of the truth. Dominican preaching is then nothing less than “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:13). This is why preaching the truth is not merely a task, but a way of life. When we live the truth we are truly free.

LAUDARE, BENEDICERE, PRAEDICARE (TO PRAISE, TO BLESS, TO PREACH)



This motto comes from the Preface for Marian feasts. The story is told of a cardinal who, having been sent to investigate the newly founded Dominican Order, began to have doubts about the existence of these new religious. Troubled by what he should recommend, the cardinal opened the Missal at the altar and read these words: “It is right for our salvation that we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks to you, holy Lord, and that we should *praise, bless, and preach* You.” Immediately, the cardinal recognized these actions as the authentic mission and the fruits of the Dominican charism. Because of this witness, the early Dominicans adopted this

phrase as a motto to describe the spirit of St. Dominic and the undertaking of preaching the gospel that attracted so many followers to him.

In the grace of baptism, Christ comes alive in us. But this divine life has to be nurtured in order to grow and mature. All of us who have been baptized have a responsibility to care for the spiritual well-being of others. Just as our bodies need exercise in order to stay healthy, so too we have to exercise our spiritual gifts in order to thrive in our love of God and neighbor. One of the gifts of baptism is that we begin to share in Christ’s three-fold mission of king, priest, and prophet. And it is in light of this Dominican motto that we practically exercise the three-fold mission of Christ. First, *to praise* God can be seen as the action of a king or a person of responsibility. This becomes clear when we consider that those with responsibility are called primarily to serve. A practical way in which we serve God is to praise him for all the gifts that we have received. When we receive a gift from a friend, it would be unimaginable not to express gratitude to our friend and praise their benefaction. The same is true for our relationship with God. As the source of all that we have, we

have a responsibility to praise and thank God for his goodness. For Dominicans, this is lived out by chanting the psalms and worshiping God at Mass. But praise of God takes many forms; it can be as simple as a brief morning prayer. It is the grateful heart that expresses creative praise. The fruit of praise is the union of mind and heart with God in an attitude of grateful service. To praise God for his goodness is an exercise of the royal mission of service which we owe to our loving creator.

Second, *to bless* is to exercise a priestly role. When we are a blessing to or for someone, we are the instrument of God's presence. This is the role of a priest – to be a channel for God's grace in the world. In his providence, God has chosen to act through human beings in order to accomplish his will. When we bless others, we allow God to act through us. Consider that Jesus was the perfect expression of God and that, through him, God's power came alive in the world. Similarly, when we bless, the presence of God comes to exist in the world in a new way. Jesus no longer walks among us, but it is through our hands and voice of blessing that God continues to act with power.

Finally, *to preach* is a prophetic act. Prophets are those who speak for God. As God's representative, the prophet preaches both a word of challenge and a word of healing. By our baptism we are given prophetic ability so that we might effectively carry out Christ's great commission to preach the gospel to all nations. Speaking for God takes on various forms, yet it comes forth from a courageous spirit to spread the good news of the gospel. Thus the Dominican mission to praise, bless and preach is an exercise of our fundamental baptismal graces.



CONTEMPLARE ET CONTEMPLATA ALIIS TRADERE
(TO CONTEMPLATE AND TO SHARE THE FRUITS OF
ONE'S CONTEMPLATION)

The third Dominican motto that enjoys wide popularity comes from the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. Since we cannot give what we do not possess, St. Thomas characterizes the Dominican life as a balance between contemplation and active preaching. Jesus himself models this mutuality: before any significant act, Jesus first steals away to a quiet place of prayer. It is from this place of communion with his Father that Jesus teaches and preaches with authority. Prayer and preaching complement each other – one nourishes and stimulates the other. Prayer without preaching would be stagnant, while preaching without prayer would be empty.

For the Dominican, contemplation begins with Scripture. Through studying and pondering the meaning of revelation, we are led to preach the gospel to others. Like Mary who “pondered” the words of her Son, we too reflect and meditate on the word that Jesus has for us today, in this moment. And when we receive this word, we imitate Mary's own visitation, as we rush to our friends to share the good news of God's activity in our lives. This quiet contemplation that bursts forth into joyful expression is characteristic of Dominican spirituality.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. How do you preach the truth?
2. What does praising the Lord look like in your life?
3. How do you bless others in your life?
4. How do you share your gifts with others?

Michael Hurley, O.P.
August 2005