



The Intellectual Mission of the Dominican Order Today

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I am delighted and honored to be able to share some thoughts with you after having read the many reports submitted by the regents in preparation for this meeting. I write these reflections as both an academic and a major superior, mindful of the fact that I am also a “friendly” outsider to the Dominican order. Therefore I ask your indulgence if my comments may at times be unmindful of the nuances in your way of understanding the Dominican mission. While my community is extremely small compared to the Dominicans (only around 600 priests and brothers in 15 countries) I easily identified with much of what was in the reports. Having taught at Catholic Theology Union in Chicago (USA) for over thirteen years before my election as Superior General, I was also fascinated by the academic/intellectual aspect of the descriptions of the world-wide Dominican presence.

This past September and October, I made a pastoral visit to our largest Viatorian province centered in Québec, Canada. I was both amused and taken aback by the tale of one of our older priests who spoke to me of his efforts at evangelizing in the current secularized culture of francophone Canada. He was invited by a teacher from the school next door to our provincial house (which had once been our school—now a municipal public school) to give a tour of the rather large chapel of our residence to his class of 11th grade students. The reason for the tour, according to the teacher, was that very few of these students had ever even entered a church before and had no idea about basic elements of ecclesiastical architecture and furnishings. This lacuna in their general culture severely limited their ability to understand some basic history of Québec—a society that had been, until the secularization that took place in the 1960s called the “tranquil revolution,” a culture profoundly marked by Catholicism. According to my confrere, this group of thirty students came into the chapel as if

* This talk was delivered during the Congress of Regents of Studies meeting held at *il Carmelo* in Rome, Italy from November 22-27, 2009.

they had just landed on Mars. They were respectful, but obviously they were indeed in unknown territory. He began his tour from the back of the chapel and all seemed to go well, but when he took the group up the sanctuary area and started to use some religiously technical words like “sacrament,” “tabernacle,” “host,” “chalice,” “crucifix” he saw that the kids were looking at him and at each other with amusement. Finally, he stopped his tour and asked why they were laughing. One of the guys piped up and said, “Father, we have heard these words all our lives, but always thought they were just “swear words” (*sacres*) with no particular meaning. You have finally explained to us their original reference!”

In many ways, this story illustrates the very changed context in which some of us are called to live and work at the beginning of the twenty first century—at least in those parts of the world that have been considered nominally “Christian” until thirty years ago. While the situation is slightly different in Anglophone Canada and the United States, I no longer wonder why so many “mature” religious from the Euro-American world feel “displaced” living in the changed social context that seems absolutely ignorant of anything to do with traditional religion. We in the global north (which un-geographically includes Australia) live in a post-modern, *Secular Age*—to invoke Charles Taylor’s recent magisterial book¹—that has made religious faith just one option among many that claim to be the route to human flourishing. It needs to be admitted that many of our contemporaries, at least in the global north, are not being persuaded very effectively by the churches that traditional Christianity is worth investigating. There are indications, however, that we are experiencing a renewed interest in matter of faith in secularized societies such as Great Britain that heretofore regarded religious belief as an irrelevant anachronism.²

How different, though, is the religious situation of the island nation of Haiti where I made a pastoral visit last spring. In this, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, stricken continually by human folly and natural disasters, belief in God (or at least the supernatural) is taken for granted. This is obvious from conversations with Haitians and visible on any road in the country. In Port-au-Prince, for example, the streets are clogged during the day with jeep-like public conveyances called *tap-taps*, each colorfully painted and emblazoned with the name of a saint, a Bible verse, or an edifying saying. My favorite slogan of them all is *Christ capable* (you can do anything if you’re with Christ). While the saying goes that you don’t find atheists in foxholes, it seems equally true that their presence in the world is also very rare in conditions of dire poverty.

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, London, UK: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 2007).

² John Micklethwait, Adrian Woodridge, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (London: Penguin, 2009).

While the economic divide between Canada and Haiti is all too tragic and evident, the difference between the emotional and cognitive worlds that separate these two cultures is even greater. In many ways, they represent two extremes present in today's world that illustrate culture's relationship to modernity that affects religion and religious belief. A simple comparison between a "developed" country of the global north and one from the global south, between say Canada and Haiti, or France and Burkina Faso, naturally raises questions for those of us charged with proclaiming the Gospel. Can we realistically suppose that we are able to proclaim the Gospel in the same way, using the same emphases in these two very different contexts? What of the members of our religious communities whose mental processes and *weltanschauung* have been formed by their cultures: can we really expect that their religious and intellectual formation be effectively the same? What of our identity and charism as religious, even the venerable Dominican tradition; can we say that it is legitimately lived out in the same way in these two very different contexts? What of the international relationship between these two different experiences of Christian and Dominican life? Finally and most importantly, for this paper, how can the intellectual mission of the Order of Preachers be faithfully promoted in these wildly divergent contexts?

I do not pretend that I can give an exhaustive response to all of these questions. I would hope, though, that the following pages may help focus your thinking on some of the aspects of promoting the intellectual mission of your Order in the extraordinarily diverse world in which you are ministering.

Different Expectations

As I noted above, I found the reports of the various regents regarding the state of the theological work fascinating. The length and breadth of your teaching and other initiatives on the international scene is truly impressive. It seems to me, though, if I am reading the responses accurately, the challenges that are felt in the Euro-American provinces are experienced in a much different way in those provinces of the non-Western and developing world.³ The greatest challenges in the global north seem to revolve around questions of maintaining and transmitting faithfully the Dominican charism for the intellectual life into the future. A constant concern was for the young brothers in formation to be imbued with the thought of the great medieval minds of the Order, especially Thomas Aquinas. How will it be possible to continue this vital aspect of the mission with the loss of an institutional platform for such study

³ There is no easy way to refer to the countries of the North Atlantic world (Europe and North America) as well as Australia and New Zealand which share the same cultural *zeitgeist* and economic development. "Global north" is one possibility, but I realize that geographically Australia and New Zealand are hardly in the north. The same is true for the designation "global south" where Asia also does not "cooperate" geographically. I would be happy to find new terms to try to describe these realities, but until I do, "North" and "South" is my handy but inaccurate short-hand.

essentially caused by lack of religious vocations? How is it possible to maintain Dominican identity in these less than ideal conditions? The responses from the global south on the other hand seem to emphasize the manner in which this tradition is being handed on. There seems to be a constant concern for better cross-cultural and intercultural communication in order to build a more solid and comprehensible foundation to make use of the insights of the great European thinkers of the Order. In reading “in between the lines,” I discern an uneasiness regarding the nature of Dominican identity for the more numerous young brothers of the global south. Is it in following existing Euro-American patterns, or in a creativity that can take into account a much different cultural matrix for both the Church and the Order? These are open questions that I cannot answer, but it seems to me that it is important to sort out expectations regarding the basic points of reference for this intellectual mission; a mission that is consciously or unconsciously formed by its cultural context.

Proclaiming the Gospel in “Mixed Times” (*tiempos mixtos*)

Fernando Calderón, Bolivian sociologist, has made what many consider to be a very important contribution in looking at cultural change. While his point of reference is Latin America, his general theory of simultaneous, multiple relationships to modernity present in contemporary society is an important hermeneutic in analyzing our ability to effectively preach the Gospel in our globalized world.⁴ Robert Schreiter has already made very fruitful use of Calderon’s insights.⁵ Briefly, he also applies Calderon’s observations to most of the world. He speaks of us living in mixed times (*tiempos mixtos*)—that because of immigration and globalization, the people with whom we are working can have at least three understandings of reality based on their relationship to modernity: mentalities that are pre-modern, modern and postmodern. The “pre-modern” outlook is characterized by a primacy of the traditional over the rational, of the collective over the individual, by a religious worldview serving as a „sacred canopy“ over the other sectors of society. The “modern” mentality largely inspired by the Enlightenment, presupposes a critical stance toward tradition and values human reasoning and individual rights in a unitary view of the world regulated by universal norms. Finally the post-modern is a response to the shortcomings or the limits of the modern in that it is ever mindful of the perplexing diversity of human life and meaning. The postmodern is undergirded by the modern, with its concern for the individual and the individual’s rights, but questions modernity’s total reliance on the rational and its assumptions about progress. Because of patterns of immigration to modernized societies, the pre-modern, the modern and the postmodern now often exist together, and people - especially the poor and the immigrant - find themselves exiting and entering these spheres every day.

⁴ Fernando Calderón, “América Latina: identidad y tiempos mixtos. O como tratar de pensar de la modernidad sin dejar ser indio.” *David y Goliath* 17:52 (septiembre, 1987) 4-9.

⁵ Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Orbis: Maryknoll, NY, 1997) 55-57.

With these mentalities in mind, the task of evangelization as well as formation for ministry becomes much more complicated. We ignore these plural consciousnesses at our peril. I remember several years ago I attended a Hispanic liturgy conference in Texas that dealt with the topic of "Liturgy and Popular Religion." One of the perennial concerns at such meetings was the lack of Hispanic vocations to the Presbyterate and the consecrated life. After hearing many pious affirmations about the importance of praying for vocations and encouraging them among the young, a woman took the floor and said quite frankly that she was hesitant to encourage young men to enter the seminary. While celibacy was a partial issue, she stated that even more serious was the fact that theological education in the seminary alienates Hispanic young people from their own traditions and renders them incapable of dealing with popular religious practices that they come to see as just "superstition." In other words, to use the Calderón's hermeneutic, theological education was responsible for making pastoral ministers incapable of dealing with the pre-modern world view which is the context in which popular religion continues to flourish in the US Hispanic community. The woman seemed to know intuitively that the pastoral formation issue was one of equipping ministers to deal with and value a variety of worldviews in order to successfully serve the Christian community.

This points, then, to a post-modern approach to both theological education and pastoral praxis that sensitizes individuals to a range of possible (orthodox) theological interpretations that are produced by awareness of the context's relationship vis-à-vis modernity. While the intellectual life needs to be prized, it cannot be considered a kind of static acquisition that is divorced from the concerns of real people trying to live the faith in a variety of conditions. As many of you pointed out, Dominic's very purpose of founding the order was the "salvation of souls." Hence, it would seem that any Dominican approach to the intellectual life that is not mindful of the real life of people would fall short of the founder's vision.

Also, this approach is hardly something completely new. After all, we have four Gospels, each of which came to be in order to address the theological and social concerns of particular groups of Christians who were trying to live out the consequences of the Christ-event. A plurality of approaches, rather than one overarching theological system, then, seems to be called for by the new brave world of post-modernity. Naturally there are limits, but the path opened here is to the full and rich diversity of traditional Catholic teaching that is not focused on just one era or one method.

I am not calling, however, for the abandonment of your concern for identity that is often described as "Thomism" — as long as it is understood more as a way of life that goes beyond the theology found in the *Summa*. Clearly, this identity is a

precious one, developed over centuries and has much to contribute to the Church. The key challenge, of course, is to inculturate this particular way of life in the many contexts in which you are living.

The “Deregulation” of Religious Authority

A related issue that increasingly challenges our efforts to preach the Gospel is the question of authority. In fact, I believe that in places like the United States the issue of who has the authority to teach—or should I say the credibility to teach and preach—is becoming a real issue in the age of the blogosphere and general distrust of institution the purport to have “the truth.” Along with government, the Church seems to have lost the most credibility because of the bishops’ handling of priestly pedophilia cases. There is possibility that in some areas of both the global north and the global south we are misinterpreting a secularizing loss of faith for this change in mentality in regard the way people ascribe authority.

This question of credibility/authority struck me while a participant in the 2005 Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist. I was numbed by the many interventions that bemoaned the secularization of western culture—a development that has severely weakened the Church and its ability to proclaim the Gospel, especially among the young. While secularization is undoubtedly a factor—especially in Europe—in the United States, I believe that we are experiencing another dynamic that we ignore at our peril. The cultural dynamic that works against the coherence of the Church and its message in the United States for example, is not secularization as such. The vast majority of Americans are still believers. Rather it is what has been called “deregulation” of religious authority. In an insightful study of the effect of U.S. culture on religion and religious sensibilities, Vincent Miller of Georgetown University has persuasively argued that while the vast majority of Americans still claim belief in God and identification with Christianity, the authority of what is regarded as “institutional religion” has steadily eroded.

The decline once described in terms of an all-encompassing secularization appears, rather, to have been a decline in the social and cultural power of religious institutions. The symbols, practices and myths that they once stewarded continue to inform people’s lives, but religious authorities and institutions exercise less control over how these are used. Some writers employ metaphors drawn from economics to describe this shift. They speak of the “deregulation” of religion or the decline of religious institutional monopolies.⁶

⁶ Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2003) 92.

This insight helps to explain the oft-heard assertion of people in the United States and other places that they are “spiritual” but not “religious.” It also sheds light on how it is possible for many young people to identify certain personalities as positive role models—Pope John Paul II, the Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa—while able to be indifferent to or completely reject much of their moral teaching. Used to picking and choosing what they want to follow and what they reject in the market of cultural possibilities, many young people are able, for example, to enthusiastically attend World Youth Day, scream wildly for the Pope when he arrives and during the various celebrations of the event and then largely disregard his very emphatic teachings on a variety of issues involving sexual ethics.

This raises the specter of “cafeteria Catholics”—the faithful who choose what part of the message of the Gospel presented by the church they will follow. This charge is usually leveled against the young and the liberals by the “real” Catholics on the right although it is also obvious that Catholics along the whole ideological spectrum pick and choose what part of the Tradition will inform their behavior. The recent furor over President Obama’s invitation to speak at Notre Dame University illustrates the ideological divide within US Catholicism. It is for that reason the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin’s “common ground initiative” met with such resistance from both sides of the ideological spectrum. For example, the ethic of the “seamless garment of life” he proposed as a way for Catholics to be coherent in their approach to life issues; to oppose capital punishment as well as to abortion. This approach was flatly rejected by many conservative Catholics who see the State’s right to execute criminals as a deterrent to violent crime—despite the US Catholic Bishops position to the contrary.



The Need for a New Apologetics

It seems to me that the day has passed when the leaders of the Church, as well as those who preach and teach in its name, can insist that they are proclaiming “the truth” simply because of the office they hold. The deregulation of authority has important consequences for the intellectual life of the church since “what the church teaches,” especially if it runs counter to the current wisdom of the world, is not automatically accepted by the population at large or even by many Catholics. What seems to be needed is a bridge between the Catholic theological tradition and modern culture in order for the two to enter into dialogue. Call this bridge a new kind of apologetics—or by a corresponding name: inculturation. While explaining the Faith to people in the North or the South, the words need to make sense in order to hope for any kind of a dialogue or conversion. In 1975, in his groundbreaking exhortation on evangelization, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI called the gulf between the Gospel and our cultures “the drama of our time.”⁷ If anything this gulf has grown wider.

Happily there are examples of what many would regard as successful efforts at what could be termed a new apologetics. It goes beyond a simple repetition of dry doctrinal orthodoxies, but interprets them in a way accessible to the people who have not been immersed in a Christian culture from their childhood. One of the best examples of a successful practitioner of this kind of apologetics is your former Master General, Timothy Radcliffe. If I may be so bold as to quote him to you:

We often complain about the immense ignorance of the young about Christianity. But we shall waste our time in producing more documents, videos, radio and TV programmes unless we also labour to make the Church a place of evident freedom, courage, joy and hope. We must choose with care the words we speak. Truth matters. But our words will be useless unless they are embedded in communities which show how they are pointed beyond us, to the one who has sought us out and given us his Word.⁸

This new apologetics/inculturation is just as needed in the South as in the North, but to return specifically to the topic of this paper, what can the Dominican Order do to strengthen its traditional mission of “doing theology” for the Church at large? Having made some general comments, let me advance some more focused and concrete suggestions and strategies that you may find useful. I offer these both as an

⁷ Pope Paul VI, “*Evangelii nuntiandi*,” 20.

⁸ Timothy Radcliffe OP, *What’s the Point of Being a Christian?* (London: Burns & Oates Continuum, 2005) 5.

academic and a religious superior who admires what you have done in past and what you continue to do in this important area. The rest of us need you to continue to take this part of your charism seriously for the good of the Church.

Communities of Learning

One of the most interesting aspects of theological education today is that the way we both teach and “do” theology is becoming increasingly aware of the need of locating its work in the context of a believing, intentional community. It is here that the Dominicans have (or ought to have) a real advantage. I was intrigued by several of the regents’ reports that spoke about the formation of scholarly communities where a value is placed on the interaction of the members of a faculty with one another as both community members and scholars: brothers who pray, study and pursue the intellectual life together. More and more theological centers are experiencing that the formation of a community of colleagues who are able to work together in a multidisciplinary way, offering courses, symposia and other presentations, models how theology is best presented to both future ministers who will be practitioners and to future scholars.

The image of the lone theologian writing in his ivory tower cannot respond effectively to the needs of today’s students—in both the North and the South. This moment to create interdisciplinary faculty communities of learning is one of the key insights of the “Keystone Conferences” on U.S. Catholic theological education that took place in the 1990s.⁹ This insight—in effect—is re-proposing what Dominicans knew very well in the Middle Ages when they set up *studia* in the intellectual centers of Europe. This leads to another strategy of dealing with promoting the intellectual life: broad collaboration.

Collaboration with other Religious Laity

In these days of decreasing vocations in the North and in economic limitations in the South, maintaining a “pure” theological center whose personnel belong to one particular Order or religious community is becoming increasingly untenable. It is also, in my opinion, undesirable. In the Union of Superiors General over the past several years an increasing interest has developed about how the various members of the consecrated life can collaborate on projects together. One of the most enthusiastic of the superiors general proposing this collaboration has been the Jesuit general, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás. Though superior of the largest religious community in the Church, he, too, is of the opinion that now, more than ever, religious need to look for ways in which they can work together, enriching their ministry with the charism and traditions of different communities. In these days of economic recession and

⁹ Victor Klimoski, Kevin O’Neil, Katerina Schuth, *Educating Leaders for Ministry* (Collegeville MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 2005) 112-133.

diminishing resources in both the North and South, collaboration seems the only sensible course of action.

From personal experience, having taught on a theological faculty composed of women and men from over twenty different religious communities as well as lay people, I have to say that the experience help focus what each community has to offer in a way that would have been impossible if the school were directed by one group. The “identity” of each community was continually compared and contrasted by both faculty and students and became an important facet of the educational experience itself. As personnel and resources become stretched in the North as well as the South, the fruitful collaboration among religious communities in theological education is not only a more efficient use of personnel, it also offers an important model to the students we are educating and helps to lift us out of parochialism that sometimes comes from dealing only with the resources that our individual communities have at their disposal.

Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue

Clearly, one of the values that shines forth in many of your responses is that of fostering ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. As the world gets smaller and the effects of immigration and globalization continue to grow, this kind of dialogue is not a nice option, it is an absolute necessity for us who claim to be responsible interpreters of our cultures and our religious tradition. In established centers of theology in the North, dialogue with believers of other Christian churches as well as with Jews, Muslims and others is a very important component for any kind of academic or pastoral degree in theology. In the Global South, in Africa and Asia, the need for true ecumenical and interreligious dialogue is crucial. In many ways, it is tantamount to reconciliation and peacemaking.

Dominicans, in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas, can offer an important contribution to this dialogue. Thomas’ intellectual inquisitiveness and willingness to study Aristotle as well as Muslim commentators on Aristotle such as Avicenna and Averroes is the creative “bricolage” that enriches our theological and philosophical perspective and which he demonstrated, does not necessary succumb to syncretism. In a very real sense, then, Thomism understood from its beginnings as a response to openness to various traditions of knowing can serve as a real model for doing theology in pluralistic societies of the twenty-first century.

Internationalism

Finally, one of the constant comments reflected in the reports of the regents from the South was for material and personnel resources to help accomplish their intellectual mission. The Dominicans, like most of the religious communities in the Church, are experiencing growth in the South and retrenchment in the North. To state the matter

in a very general fashion, the success of our overall mission as Church depends on our ability to share our resources. This is accomplished by those Provinces that are able to provide monetary and personnel contributions to those parts of the Order that are in sore need of assistance. This assistance can also take the form of scholarships to intellectual centers in the North where programs and facilities are already in place for developing the intellectual gifts of the brothers. Naturally this will involve sacrifice on everyone's part and it is not easy to overcome the built-in prejudices that often separate even members of the same religious family. For those receiving students from the two-thirds world, it requires humility and a listening mind and heart to understand what they truly need. For those of the South it requires patience and the ability to overcome a temptation to a kind of pragmatism that seeks to fulfill short term needs without maintaining a challenge to strive toward excellence in the context of diverse cultures.

I am convinced that one of the most important aspects of our Christian witness as members of international religious communities is precisely in taking our internationality seriously. Personnel exchanges and other forms of international cooperation are essential if any of us can truly say that we have an idea about what "Catholic" really means.

The next twenty years promises to be a time of great challenge but also great possibility for the proclamation of the Gospel and the intellectual mission of the Dominicans. As we face the many challenges occasioned by the current social and cultural upheavals of the world, I believe that the Order of Preachers is in a wonderful position to help the rest of the Church deal with the complexities involved in offering people of today an invitation to faith that is understandable and compelling. By being faithful to the best of your Dominican tradition in maintaining communities of learning, collaboration with other religious and lay people, promoting ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue all in the context of your international presence, you offer the Church an effective way of announcing God's reign to both the world and to the Church itself.