

Misericordia Veritatis: **The Heart of a Dominican Theology of Evangelization**

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The ministry to preach God's word to the world is the duty of all Christ's faithful. Members of the Order of Preachers fulfill this ministry according to their identity and charism. The article presents some characteristics of a "Dominican way" of preaching the Word by looking at the beginning of Dominican presence and preaching in the Philippines. The providential confluence between the Jubilee of the Order (8th Centenary) and the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy reframes the ministry of preaching as an act of charity and mercy. The Order's charism to preach Jesus, is in fact a sublime act of charity, a most gracious and generous act that propels us to share our greatest treasure, the Word-Incarnate. Truly, "the greatest work of charity is evangelization". Preaching or teaching, nourished by assiduous study, is rightly seen as work of charity. Conversely, charitable works, like the corporal works of mercy are both works of charity and preaching, for they proclaim God's merciful love.

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The Octocentennial of the Order of Preachers is a celebration of the coming to birth of the charism of a *new* way of Preaching God's Word. At first blush, the title of this Theology Week on the Jubilee of the Order hints at a certain self-referential and self-congratulatory attitude: *Building the Church, the Dominican Way*. But what precisely is the "Dominican Way"? We call ourselves the Order of Preachers, but Blessed Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* has

emphasized that “preaching the Gospel is not optional but a duty incumbent on the Church by the command of the Lord” to preach the Gospel to all nations.¹ We call ourselves the Order of Preachers yet we hear preachers more talented and far effective than most of us, Dominicans, friars, sisters, lay and members of the priestly fraternity. All ministry, both ordained and lay, must be ordered towards building the Church, the Body of Christ. What makes such ministry uniquely *Dominican*? In clarifying our unique charism, we do not seek to exalt the Dominican way as though it is better than the manner the other great religious orders and societies have contributed in building the Church. Rather, we hope, with the help of our distinguished speakers, to have a better understanding of the gift entrusted to Dominic for the building of the Church; that we might be grateful for such charism and gladly share it to Dominicans of the next century.

A Dominican Way of Evangelizing

If we are to determine a Dominican way of evangelizing, the first question we need to ask is: What is the Dominican identity? If identity makes us who we are and stand apart from the rest, does it mean that we are the only ones who preach? This might be true at the beginning of the thirteenth century. It was reported that when Dominic petitioned the Pope to allow him to found an order of preachers, the Pope wondered why this priest wanted to found an order of bishops; for in those times, only bishops have the authority to preach.² Such is no longer the case today. We could claim though that, thanks to Dominic, the authority to preach is no longer reserved to the Order of Bishops. The charism of preaching is not exclusive to us Dominicans, any more than it was exclusive to Bishops after Dominic founded the Order. But what makes our preaching, our work of evangelization unique is the way the Order was founded. It is said that the foundational moment came when Dominic decided to send the brothers. In 1217, Dominic sent seven friars to Paris *to study, to preach, and to establish a community*.³ Dominicans carry out the task of evangelization through these three-fold mission: to study, to preach, and to build a community. It must be noted that though the name of the new foundation is “Order of Preachers,” the “mission” to study and build communities are not simply subordinated to the mission of preaching. *Studying is in itself a mission, building community is in itself a mission*. As the current Master of the Order has stressed: “*we are not just together for the sake of the mission, being together is part of the mission.*” The distinctive fusion of these three-fold mission, combined with our pillars of life, history and tradition, constitute what we may call the *Dominican Way*.

¹ Blessed Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 5.

² Simon Tugwell, ed. *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982) p. 14.

³ Jordan of Saxony, *Libellus*, 51.

The Church of the thirteenth century was in crisis. Dominic and Francis came at a time when the Church was in great need of a “new evangelization.” According to hagiographic tradition that is depicted in several works of art, Pope Innocent dreamt that the Church was collapsing, but Francis and Dominic came to support it and prevent its destruction.

In recent times, we listened attentively to the Church’s call for a “new evangelization.” I wish to turn to the “old evangelization” carried out by the Dominicans in the Philippines and see important lessons that could be useful for our work of evangelization today.

According to historians, the Augustinians were the first preachers of the Gospel in Pangasinan. But their missionary efforts have won more converts among the Ilocanos in the north and the Pampangos in the south than in Pangasinan itself. Except for Lingayen, Dagupan and Manaoag, the rest of Pangasinan was hostile to the missionaries. The Augustinians would attribute such behavior to the hardheartedness of the Pangasinenses; though it is most likely that such hostility was a result of the identification of the missionaries with the Spanish soldiers whose abuses against the natives were reported by the Augustinians to the King.⁴

Barely two months after the first Dominicans arrived in the Philippines on July 21, 1587, six of them were sent by the Bishop of Manila, Domingo de Salazar, OP to Pangasinan. They settled in Binalatongan, now San Carlos, in a hut of bamboo and nipa.⁵ They labored hard without any success for three years. The natives refused to sell them food or provisions to make them feel unwelcome. At one point, the vicar, Fray Bernardo Santa Catalina was accused of impregnating a young woman who hailed from a noble family.⁶ When the attempt to destroy the missionaries’ reputation did not work, the natives tried a different strategy. A village chief offered the tenacious friars a *chinanta* of gold,⁷ about 6 kilos, just so they would leave their village in peace. Imagine that: the natives were willing to pay, so that the friars would stop preaching! Either the Gospel really troubled their conscience so much; or the friars were extremely annoying preachers! (I think that could be a creative form of fund raising: “Donate, or else, I will continue to preach!”)

For three long years, the friars faced a different kind of martyrdom. Their lives were not threatened, but their reputation and integrity were constantly put to

⁴ Rosario Mendoza Cortes, *Pangasinan, 1572-1800* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1974) pp. 69-70.

⁵ Cortes, p. 72. The humble dwelling was provided by Jimenez del Pino.

⁶ T. Valentino Sitoy, Jr., *A History of Christianity in the Philippines Vol. I: The Initial Encounter* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1985) p. 243.

⁷ Cortes, p. 73, Sitoy 242.

the test. Yet the missionaries persevered. How can they be threatened, when they have already placed their lives in the hands of God from the moment they decided to make a perilous journey across the Pacific? How can they be tempted with glittering gold when they have already decided to leave everything to follow the Lord? These were friars who responded to a recruitment letter of Fray Juan Crisostomo, which read, in part:

In the first place, the voyage is difficult; one has to go through many hardships; the food and drinks rot; the ship gets dirty and stinking...⁸

I really wonder if we would get any vocations today if our vocation poster says: “be a Dominican, and we will offer you a dangerous journey with free rotten food and drinks!”

The first Dominicans who came to our country did exactly what Dominic asked the first brothers to do: to study, to preach, and to build community.

Sent to Study

Fray Crisotomo’s letter indicated study as integral to their pastoral program:

Once assigned to different places, we must begin to learn the language, which is hard work, and with its knowledge, we shall catechize the unbelievers on the matters of our holy Catholic faith...

This is the simple pastoral program that gave us the first book printed in the Philippines, *La Doctrina Cristiana* of 1593, that is written in Latin, Spanish and our very own native script, *Baybayin*. Our newest saint, San Pedro Calungsod, is depicted holding a copy of this book. This 423 year-old catechism is the oldest document that proves we have a native script. This means that the first evangelizers tried their best to study and learn the language of the people. The oldest translation of the Lord’s Prayer in Tagalog is a classic example of intercultural theology. For instance, the petition “lead us not into temptation”, which is difficult to understand because *why would a good father lead his child to temptation*, was translated as “*Huwag mo po kaming iiwan upang di kami matalo ng tukso*” (*Huwag mo kaming eewan nang di kami matalo nang tocso*⁹). The missionaries studied the culture and discovered the Filipino value of “walang iwanan.”

⁸ Fray Juan Crisostomo, “Letter to Prospective Missionaries, Spain 1586” in *The Dominicans Mission Here and Now* ed. by Fausto Gomez, OP (Manila: UST Press, 1988) pp. 135-140.

⁹ *Doctrina Christiana, en lengua española y tagala, corregida por los Religiosos de las ordenes Impressa con licencia, en S. gabriel. de la orden de. S. Domingo En Manila. 1593.*

Sent to Preach

Fray Crisostomo's letter clearly indicated the mission to preach:

We must preach, moreover, through our life style so that, if our teaching of doctrine does not move hearts, our lives will move all those who see us; this is the best of teaching.

The friars must have taken this to heart so that after three years of unsuccessful efforts, a chief decided to ask for baptism. Aduarte reports:

*One native chief approached one missionary one night and said: 'I have observed you for three years; if one does not eat, neither do the others; if one prays at midnight, so do the rest; if one avoids women, so do the others; all follow one rule or path; all have patience and do us good. Thus, I have determined to believe you, because I am persuaded that men of this manner do not lie.'*¹⁰

This moving little story of the "old evangelization" of Pangasinan presents an important enduring lesson for a "new evangelization" today. Those who are called to evangelize must have the proper motivation. The friars who were sent to Pangasinan in 1588 responded to a "recruitment letter" by Fray Juan Crisostomo in 1586 that minced no words in describing the hardships of both the journey and destination. The invitation attracted men with heroic motivation, who were fired up by the Spirit, summoned by the irresistible grace of God; hence, they can face any danger and failure.

Sent to Build Community

The first Dominican community that arrived in 1587 was called a *barcada*, for they arrived in a *barca*, a boat. Today, we call close friends "barkada." For these missionaries, the first apostolate is to live in community. Our first Dominican communities were not called "*conventus*" or convent but *sacra praedicatio*, *holy preaching*, the task around which we were gathered. The first apostolate is to live in community. The unanimity of heart and mind of the church remains its most eloquent form of preaching. The "old evangelization" that is surprisingly ever-new bears witness to this. Tertullian reported that the Christians' works of love captured the attention of the unbelievers who confessed in astonishment; *See how they love one another!*

¹⁰ Diego Aduarte, quoted by Cortes, p. 73.

To live in community is to preach as one community. The basic ministry of the friars preachers is *to live harmoniously in community*. Experience tells us that this is a very difficult apostolate, to live together in community and to preach with one voice.

It was during the same missionary era when the friar Antonio de Montesinos preached a sermon in defense of the natives in Hispaniola (present-day Dominican Republic and Haiti). The Spanish conquistadors who were terribly offended by the sermon went to complain to the Prior, Pedro de Cordoba. And the Prior told them that *when Antonio preached, it was the whole community who preached*.¹¹

To proclaim the Good News, motivated by no less than the compulsion to speak from the abundance of one's heart about God's boundless love; to preach the faith of the Church with a firm conviction that to live the values of the Gospel in community is the first form of preaching; and to study and listen attentively to the voice, values, and culture of God's people, these are important lessons of the "old evangelization" that should have an enduring influence in today's new evangelization.

Misericordia Veritatis

At the beginning of our life in the Order, we were asked one question: "what do you seek?;" we prostrated, and with our noses on the floor of the church, we responded: "God's *mercy* and yours." We are Dominicans because of God's mercy. If our lives as Dominicans began with that primordial desire to obtain mercy, then doing theology, *as Dominicans*, ought to proceed from the same impetus. It is no wonder that our Master of the Order, Fr. Bruno Cadoré OP, has rightly pointed out the providential confluence between the *Jubilee of the Order* and the *Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*.

We are called to teach and preach Jesus, "the face of the Father's mercy."¹² The ministry of the Word, the Order's charism to preach Jesus, is in fact a sublime *work of mercy*, an act of charity. Pope Benedict taught that "the greatest act of charity is evangelization... There is no action more beneficial – and therefore more charitable – towards one's neighbor than to break the bread of the word of God, to share with him the Good News of the Gospel, to introduce him to a relationship with God."¹³ It is no wonder then that our motto "Veritas" could also be understood as "Passion for the Truth and Compassion for Humanity."¹⁴

¹¹ Timothy Radcliffe, OP, "To Praise, to Bless, to Preach: The Mission of the Dominican Family," An address to the Dominican Family, Manila, 2000.

¹² Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 1.

¹³ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2013, no. 3.

¹⁴ cf. Mary O'Driscoll, OP, *St. Catherine of Siena, Passion for the Truth, Compassion for Humanity* (New York: New City Press, 2008).

Pope Francis described good theologians as akin to good shepherds who *smell like the people*, who bear the odor of God's flock, and who "with their reflection, pour oil and wine on the wounds of the people." How could doing theology help bring healing to wounded souls and hope to fractured communities? The first thing we must do is to go where the wounded are. Teaching and studying, the Pope tells us, means "living on a frontier, one in which the Gospel meets the needs of the people which should be proclaimed in an understandable and meaningful way."¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas stood at this frontier when he creatively engaged Aristotelian and Arabic thought. Francisco de Vitoria and Bartolome de las Casas stood on the frontier between the "old world" and the "new world" and fought, by their theological reflection and ministry, against the evils of racism and colonialism.

Our Dominican confreres have identified some of these *frontiers of evangelization* a few years ago in Avila:¹⁶

1. The *frontier between life and death*, or the challenge of justice and peace in the world, the frontier where economic and political structures place a large number of people between life and death situations;
2. The *frontier between humanity and inhumanity*, or the challenge of the marginalized, the frontier described by the Pope as a "throw-away culture," where people are seen as "disposable," a frontier that is partly created by an economy of exclusion;
3. The *frontier of Christian experience*, or the space where Christianity meets the major religious traditions of the world;
4. The *frontier of religious experience*, or the challenge of secularization, where religion is pushed from the public to the private sphere.
5. The *frontier of the Church*, or the sphere where the Catholic Church meets the plurality of Christian confessions and movements.

We need not go far to stand on any of these frontiers that often intersect with one another. We find the borders between humanity and inhumanity, between life and death on our streets. Pope Francis says that poverty and hunger in our world is a *scandal*. And a bigger scandal is we are no longer scandalized, we have become immune and desensitized to pain and suffering around us. We are no longer bothered by this "negative experience of contrast." If we are God's children, how come many live lives that are beneath the dignity of God's child? God's generous providence is

¹⁵ Pope Francis, "Letter to University of Argentina" March 10, 2015.

¹⁶ General Chapter of Avila, 1986.

terribly offended when His children go hungry in a fruitful world, go naked in a world filled with all kinds of materials for clothing, and go homeless and landless in a wide and spacious world.

How can we help bind the wounds of our brothers and sisters on the frontiers? A faith that seeks to understand and transform the negative experience of contrast eventually finds *misericordia veritatis*, *the mercy of truth*.

For Pope Francis, the hermeneutic key to understanding, especially to theological understanding, is *mercy*. In his message to the youth of the Philippines, he said: “The marginalized people, those left to one side, those who are discarded are crying. But we don’t understand much about these people in need. *Certain realities of life we only see through eyes cleansed by our tears*.” Compassion cures our blindness. Our study must ultimately lead us to perceive human crises, needs, longings and sufferings as *our own*. Good theology is “linked with that *misericordia* which moves us to proclaim the Gospel of God’s love for the world and the dignity which results from that love.”¹⁷ Only then could we say with the Church: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”¹⁸

Filipinos instinctively know that mercy is a key to understanding. For us, mercy is not just a matter of the heart but of the mind as well. It is interesting, that for us, to “know” or “understand” is to be “compassionate.” The Filipino word *UNAWA* (*una ang awa*, literally, “first, mercy”) encapsulates this best. *Upang maunawaan natin nang lubusan ang isang tao, kailangang mauna ang awa*. To understand is not merely “to stand-under;” for us, human understanding is ultimately *sympathetic* or *compassionate* understanding. A merciful attitude disposes us to understand persons and our world better. Mercy is no mere sentimentality. It involves both heart and mind. Similarly, understanding is not purely cognitive. *Unawa* makes the heart and mind one. “Compassion brings humility to our preaching and teaching, humility for which we are willing to listen and speak, to receive and give, that we may influence and be influenced, to be evangelized and to evangelize.”¹⁹

Mercy brings us to the frontiers and thresholds, and therefore, to the possibility of *encounter*. Pope Francis wrote on the guestbook of the University of

¹⁷ General Chapter of Providence, 108, 2001.

¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1.

¹⁹ Carlos Aspiroz-Costa, OP “Proclaiming the Gospel in the Order of Preachers” Rome, 7 November 2002.

Santo Tomas, Manila: “May the Lord bless all those studying and working for a culture of encounter.” Encounter only happens on thresholds, on frontiers, where we meet *the other*. If secularization involves the separation of the sacred from the profane, a *culture of encounter* brings us to the very space where such separation happens and bridges the gap between the sacred and the secular. A culture of encounter brings the Church out of the sacristy to the world. A culture of encounter wakes the Church up before it can dare to “wake the world up;” it wakes the Church and refocuses its gaze from its self-referential image to the world. Secularization occurs when there is a radical separation of the “City of God” from the “City of Man.” But the Church can avoid being a ghetto that is closed in on itself, when it embraces “the joys and the hopes, the griefs, and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” as its very own.

As we thank the Lord for the gift of a jubilee and pray for the blessing of more jubilees, let us remember that *evangelization* is about inviting people *to gather around Jesus*, to become a community nourished by Word and Sacrament. To baptize in the name of the Triune God is to build a community patterned after the perfect community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Evangelization is ultimately the work of the God who is ever ancient yet ever new. ■

