

Monastery Pius XII – Past, Present and Future

*Dear Sister Maria Catalano, Prioress of the Monastery of Pius XII, and sisters of this community,
Dear friars of the Convent of Our Lady of the Rosary, who serve this community,
Dear members of the Dominican Family and friends of this monastery,
My sisters and brothers,*

Today we begin the celebrations for the 70th anniversary of this monastery. The installation of the first community, among whom was Sister Diana, who bears witness to this beginning of Dominican contemplative life in Fatima, took place on the occasion of the centenary of the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which took place during the pontificate of Pius XII.

It's a moment of thanksgiving; for the monastery, for the community and for the religious life that is lived here. This is where Dominican spirituality is developed, Marian spirituality, with the specificity of Fatima, which I'll talk about in a moment, especially the four devotions that are so present in the message of this place: the Eucharist, the Rosary, reparation and the Holy Father.

This is neither the place nor the occasion to go into the history of this monastery, which is well documented, but we can't ignore it either. Just so we understand what we're celebrating, Dominican life in Portugal was trying to flourish: we had the Irish Dominicans in Lisbon, we had the newly founded Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena in Portugal and we had a few friars trying to restore the Portuguese province, founded in 1418. The arrival of some friars from the Province of Canada was invaluable for this restoration, among them Friar Pius-Marie Gaudrault, a great enthusiast and promoter of the presence of a monastery of Dominican nuns linked to the Rosary. Nothing new was going to be founded, since in 1880 another great Dominican, Friar Damian-Marie Saintourens, founded the first monastery of Nuns of the Perpetual Rosary in Calais, France. However, it made sense for there to be a Dominican, monastic presence at Fatima and for it to be like an extension of the message of Fatima with the prayer and preaching of the Rosary. It was on a trip to Rome that Friar Pius-Marie met Mother Mary Louis Bertrand, and the project for this monastery and community of Dominican Nuns was born.

As I say, the history of this monastery cannot be told in this place or at this time. For my part, I would like to offer you a reflection on three points: the past, the present and the future of this monastery.

I. The past.

The LORD said to Abram: "Leave your land, your family and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you" (Gen 12:1).

The vocation to religious life starts from a 'yes' that we give to God, when we feel that he is calling us. The story of Abraham's call is not a vocation story in the strict sense. God doesn't call him to a special consecration. God calls him, in his reality and from his reality, to begin a new love story. And what he asks of you is to leave behind a past and walk with God. The same thing happened to the sisters who lived and live in this monastery.

And twice. First, when they felt that God was calling them to a life of greater intimacy with him, through the contemplative life. Each one of them had to leave her family, the life she was somewhat oriented towards, and go to the monastery; and, a second time when they agreed to come to Fatima. Here, too, they felt God's call: Leave your land, your family, your monastery and go where he shows you. That's why we have a community that speaks and prays in English, but they have various nationalities... English, Irish, Italian, Portuguese, American, Sri Lankan and Filipino. Despite their different origins and cultures, here these sisters live the same vocation, because they didn't choose each other, but because each one of them knows she has been chosen by God.

Each sister has her own story, her own account of her vocation. However, they all have points in common: a call from God, a great love for Dominican spirituality, a great and authentic devotion to our Lady.

What are these sisters doing here? The English language, which must have been strange to many people at the time and perhaps still is strange to some today, has become a profoundly useful, Dominican and universal presence.

The sisters live the contemplative Dominican life here, which doesn't mean spending your life praying! Sister Maria Domingos, one of the Portuguese sisters who entered religious life here and who ended it here, in a conference she gave in February 1998 on contemplation, said: "If you ask pious Christians and even many priests and seminarians what they think of contemplatives, the answers are usually: 'Those who are closest to God', 'the lightning rods of humanity', 'those who pray for the world'... It's a total disembodiment." She went on to say: "*The contemplative life is a space of welcome that radiates from itself, without calculation of publicity or strategy, that summons, that lives in listening to the murmur of God and the murmurs of men. The cloister, despite its negative charge of superstructure, has an essential and positive role in the contemplative life because it allows us, through the distance that physical displacement provides, to discern the harmonies in the heavens of human experience*".

The contemplative life is very useful for believers and non-believers alike. They are neither too much nor a "waste" in the Church. They take on the spirit of Jesus, who spent so many hours in prayer; they imitate Mary, Martha's sister, sitting at the Master's feet; they are today a mirror of St. Dominic, who spoke only to God or of God.

And it is in this little expression, which in a way sums up the life of Saint Dominic, that we find the usefulness of the contemplative life in the Church and in our Order, and also in this monastery: *to speak with God and of God*. St. Thomas Aquinas, in the famous article 6 of question 188 of the *Summa Theologica*, comes to this same conclusion when asked about the usefulness of the contemplative life. It seems that a religious life dedicated to the contemplative life is not superior to one dedicated to the active life. And St. Thomas goes on to answer that just as it is more perfect to illuminate than merely to shine, it is also more perfect to communicate to others what one has contemplated than merely to contemplate (*ita maius est contemplata aliis tradere quam solum contemplari*).

Looking at this humble and discreet monastery of Dominican nuns, we feel that here people talk to God and about God, that here there is more light than brightness, that here people not only contemplate but also communicate the realities they contemplate to others. Evidence of this can be found in the many different ways in which the message of the Gospel is communicated, whether on the internet or in the bulletins they publish, in the services they provide or in the intentions they are asked to offer, or in the beautiful welcome they give to so many pilgrims who come to Fatima and feel the warmth of "Holy Preaching" in this monastery.

The sisters of this monastery are so often the voice of those who cannot pray; the consoling and hope-filled word that someone needs to hear and, for us friars, the support of our preaching. We can therefore conclude by saying that it was a good time to build a Dominican monastery in Fatima. It's a good time that there is a "special" place in Fatima where we can be sure of praise, blessing and preaching. It was a good time for the sisters to leave behind their lands, families and even their old monasteries, because here they are a presence of the merciful beauty of God who reveals himself, but who so often cannot be explained, as St. Francis, the Little Shepherd of Fatima, said: "Oh, what is God! That's what we could never say."

II. Present

"Turn to the Lord and you will be radiant; your face will not be covered with shame. Taste and see how good the Lord is: happy is the man who takes refuge in him" (Ps 33:6, 9).

It is a great grace to have a monastery in a diocese. The diocesan bishops recognize the importance of contemplative life in the diocese, because of what we have already said about prayer, support and intercession. They are light and they shine. But the monastery has its own dynamism. Paragraph V of the Nuns' Fundamental Constitution sums up their lifestyle well: "The nuns seek God by observing the norms of the purely contemplative life, by maintaining their withdrawal from the world by enclosure and silence, by working diligently, studying the truth eagerly, searching the Scriptures with ardent heart, praying intently, willingly practicing penance, pursuing communion through their manner of government, in purity

of conscience and the joy of sisterly concord, "in freedom of spirit."¹ It is God who now makes them dwell together in unity and on the last day will gather into the Holy City a people acquired as his own."

Once again, this is not the place to explain each of the regular Dominican observances. However, because this monastery is in Fatima, I would like to link some features of Dominican spirituality to the message and spirituality of Fatima. I would like to highlight four.

1. Eucharistic life.

We all know that the liturgy and the Eucharist in the first place is the source and summit of Christian life. In this sense, the Nuns' Constitutions state that "the conventual Mass should be the center of the community's liturgy. It is true that Eucharistic life is not exclusive to our Order. But it is also true that our Order, since Saint Dominic, has realized the power that the Eucharist gives us, not only as a privileged means of preaching, but also as a means of sanctification. Here too, in this monastery, the Eucharist is the center of community life. Celebrated every day, prolonged in thanksgiving and in the Blessed Sacrament exposed, the sisters and those who come here are invited to relive the mysteries of our salvation. The Eucharist, which is prepared each day with such dedication, celebrated with such devotion and prolonged in adoration, is a union between heaven and earth and between us who celebrate it. Here, too, people keep company with the hidden Jesus, as St. Francisco Marto did so many times; here, too, during the day, people stop to enter and adore Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament; and here, too, at the end of the day, some come to receive the blessing of the Blessed Sacrament as the crowning glory of a day, of a Eucharistic life.

2. Special devotion to Mary.

We have no lack of documents or traditions attesting to our filial devotion to Our Lady. In our convents, Mary is loved as Mother and honored as Queen. The Rosary is a truly contemplative prayer. It is the contemplation of the mysteries of Christ, through this simple but profound prayer, always through Mary to Jesus. This monastery, by its very nature, has the Rosary as a means of sanctification. When Fr. Damian-Marie founded the monasteries of the Perpetual Rosary, he had an intuition that there should be a "guard of honor" for Our Lady. In his words: "I often think of founding a Dominican monastery, Sisters who would consecrate themselves especially to the Perpetual Rosary". If the angels and saints form a Guard of Honor for the Blessed Mother, "what honor would it be for the daughters of Saint Dominic to assume the direction and mission of such a Guard of Honor on earth?" They would give Our Lady not just one hour a month, but their whole lives.

Here, the rosary is often prayed and contemplated before the Blessed Sacrament. As an expression of love for the Eucharistic Jesus and Mary, the sisters and anyone who passes by can enter into the mystery of God in silence and contemplation.

Here in Fatima, Our Lady introduced herself as the Lady of the Rosary. For us, the Rosary is more than a repetitive prayer, full of distractions. In 1980, the Master of the Order, Vincent de Couesnongle, wrote a Letter to the Order on the Rosary. In it, he said that the Rosary was a school of Christian life. In his words: "At a time when the merits of popular piety and religiosity are gradually being rediscovered, the Rosary appears to be a precious instrument. On the one hand, through the 'mysteries' of the life of Jesus and Mary, it places its roots in the heart of the mystery of God himself. On the other hand, thanks to the simplicity of its method, the Rosary speaks directly to the hearts of simple, uncomplicated people. It is also a reason for faith and an adherence to the source. It is a school of contemplative life. Here, where Our Lady appeared and asked so much that the Rosary be prayed every day for peace, in a world in constant danger and from war to war, the sisters of this monastery, with a special task of praying and promoting the Rosary, join in this request, almost repeating what St. Francisco Marto said when he learned that in order to go to heaven he would have to pray many Rosaries: "Oh! Our Lady, I pray as many rosaries as you want me to".

3. Reparation.

On the surface, we might think that there is nothing in our Dominican spirituality that speaks to us of the spirit of reparation. But looking at the life of St. Dominic, our Father, and more closely at our spirituality, reparation is there, both through prayer and penance and through the great desire for the salvation of souls.

In the life of Saint Dominic, reparation was also called compassion. Saint Dominic suffered from the wrong way people lived. In the minutes of Toulouse for the canonization of Saint Dominic, there is a testimony which says that "I knew of no other man who was so assiduous in prayer or who shed so many tears. And when he prayed, he prayed so loudly that he was heard everywhere. And in his cry he would say: Lord, have mercy on your people. What will become of sinners? And so he spent sleepless nights weeping and sobbing for the sins of others." His prayers, sacrifices, setbacks and penances went beyond himself. And to pray for the conversion of one's neighbor, to pray for sinners, assuming oneself to be a sinner, is to have a spirit of reparation. Our Order, so well known as the Order of Penance, teaches us to channel everything we've been through into something more useful for others than for ourselves. This intuition of St. Dominic to pray for sinners and to have a style of intercessory prayer has entered our lives in such a way that the constitutions of the Nuns read: "By reason of their religious consecration and the apostolic vocation of the Order, the nuns are urged more than the rest of the faithful to deny themselves, take up their cross, and bear the death of Jesus in body and soul, that they may merit the glory of the resurrection for themselves and for others." For themselves and for other people, says the text. We can therefore say that reparation, often made in silence and before the Lord, has a strong apostolic dimension in the contemplative life.

Here too, at Fatima, Our Lady asked the little shepherds to do penance, to offer sacrifices, to pray for people's salvation: "Pray, pray a lot, and make sacrifices for sinners, for many souls are going to hell because there is no one to sacrifice and pray for them." The little shepherds knew how to live out this spirit of penance and how to make life's setbacks, misunderstandings and their own illnesses a real sacrifice for the salvation of souls.

4. The Holy Father

Finally, I'd like to talk about the connection this monastery has with the Holy Father. In the Order's spirituality, we don't have a "special devotion" to the Pope. We consider him the Protector of the Order and the Order has always had a very strong connection to the Roman Pontiffs. If we can't mention them all, how can we not be grateful to Pope Honorius III, who not only approved our Order but also promoted it? Or Pope Gregory IX, who canonized St Dominic and praised him in his own words? How can we forget the four Popes of our Order who governed the Church with wisdom and prudence, and especially our St. Pius V, who enriched the Church with our charism? And the venerable Pope Pius XII, who gives this monastery its title, so closely linked to Fatima and the fulfillment of its message?

We pray for the Pope every day in this monastery. When we begin the blessing of the Blessed Sacrament in a little while, the sisters will sing two antiphons: one to Our Lady and the other asking for Pope Francis. The Pope is the guarantor of unity in the Church. Every day we name him in the Eucharist, and it's good that we pray for him. Last week the Pope visited Rome's City Hall. When he came out onto the balcony, he prayed a Hail Mary for the city and at the end he asked: Pray for me. And he added: for good! Being with the Pope means being *In medio Ecclesia*. St. Catherine of Siena had a great devotion to the Holy Father: she called him "sweet Christ on earth". She wrote: "Whoever does not obey Christ on earth, the one who stands in Christ's place in heaven, does not partake of the fruit of the blood of the Son of God". And on her deathbed, she prayed this prayer: "O eternal God, receive the sacrifice of my life for the benefit of this Mystical Body of the Holy Church, I have nothing to offer you but what you yourself have given me".

One of the intentions always present at Fatima is the Holy Father: his life, his intentions. This intention is also present in this monastery: we pray for him, for his health, for his ministry, for what he suffers for the Church. It's impressive how little Jacinta describes a vision she had of the Holy Father: "I saw the Holy Father in a very large house, on his knees in front of a table, with his hands on his face, crying. There were lots of people outside the house and some were throwing stones at him, others were cursing him and saying lots of ugly words. Poor Holy Father! We have to pray a lot for him." Sisters, brothers, let's pray for the Pope because this vision of Jacinta is unfortunately a contemporary one.

III. The future

“Then the word of the LORD came to me in these terms: ‘What do you see, Jeremiah?’ And I answered, ‘I see a branch of an almond tree.’ ‘You have seen well,’ said the LORD to me, ‘for I will keep watch over my word to fulfill it.’” (Jer 1:11-13)

All institutions have a past, live in the present and plan for the future. I don't know if the founders of this monastery seventy years ago had the vision to realize that in 2024 the monastery would still be active. Only Sister Diana can tell us that. But as long as there is life, there is hope.

The Church is facing a major vocations crisis. These crises are cyclical and we also know that the monastic vocation has always been more demanding, both in terms of selection and perseverance. But discouragement must not inhabit our hearts or our communities. We are who we are, in the hope that we can be more and better, inside and out. That's why in Jeremiah's prophecy, where everything seemed to be doomed, where there was no glimmer of hope, Jeremiah manages to see a branch of an almond tree, with the promise of the Lord who watches over us and keeps his word. We have to stand and resist, as Psalm 19 tells us. And we stand because we trust in God.

There is only one way to win vocations in the pastoral care of the contemplative life. An ancient way, which given to us by Jesus: *Come and see*. This will always be the best way to win vocations. But be careful: we must take care of the "see". Those who come want to see. And what do they want to see? The way we love God and the way we love each other as members of a community. A monastery, a community has to guarantee a good spiritual environment, the quality of the celebrations, the observances, but it cannot neglect the fraternal relationships that must always work and be above our moods or temperaments. When Jesus says to the disciples ‘Come and see’, there wasn't much to see, but there was a lot to feel. So much so that at that hour, that encounter was marked in the lives of those two disciples: it was evening.

Vocations ministry, wanting to have more vocations, doesn't start on the day we receive the candidates, but when we create communities in which the members live in harmony. So, dear sisters, while we ask God for vocations, let's work to receive them: quality of religious life, quality in celebrations, but also quality in relationships. May the fraternity we desire for the world be lived out in a true and sincere way in the small communities to which we belong. I see an almond branch, said Jeremiah. We can't be like Lot's wife who, looking back became a statue of salt. We cannot remain in a "pastoral of the past". We must move forward, look forward, with hope because the work is God's, we are his and he is thinking of us. As our Father St. Dominic said: "Let us walk with joy and think of our Savior".

Earlier I said that a monastery is a blessing in a diocese. And the closure of a monastery in a diocese is a catastrophe. Not because of the buildings, not because of the reduction, but because of the spiritual presence that is lost. In 2011, when the Master of the Order Friar Bruno Cadoré visited our province, he told us: "Don't look for vocations because you need to be replaced; look for vocations because the Gospel of God needs to be proclaimed". This is the real problem with the closure of convents and monasteries: God no longer being proclaimed.

Today is not a day to think about closing monasteries, but to celebrate their life and presence. God already goes ahead of us. A sister told me that at the very beginning of this convent, a priest wrote a letter in which he said that this monastery wouldn't last five years: today we're celebrating 70! Thanks be to God. Let's trust him and while we trust, let's love him with our faith and devotion and let's love those with whom we share our lives, who have been called by God as I have and who are fragile as I am.

Conclusion

My dear sisters, now for a more personal paragraph. When my name appeared a few years ago as Vicar of the Master of the Order for this monastery, none of us knew what lay ahead. At the time, I was a little reluctant to accept: I wasn't used to these positions of greater responsibility, not fluent in English, but above all because I thought that other brothers could carry out this office better and could do this job better and with more desire than me. But the Master of the Order managed to convince me to accept. I am very grateful to you for what I see, hear and feel here. Especially in the last year and a half when illness attacked me and I felt your presence and the strength of your prayers and sacrifices very closely. Believe me, this community has been the spiritual Simon of Cyrene for me, helping me to carry the Cross.

Feeling that the sisters were interested in my health, that they prayed for me and offered sacrifices for me only leads me to ask one question: what good have I done to God to deserve such closeness and affection?

Sisters, if it is true that the past impresses us, that the present makes us apprehensive, the future, however, continues to be one of hope. Let's not give up on our vocation, let's not lower our arms. Let us do what we can that this discreet and humble presence in Fatima may attract vocations to the monastery and may the faithful unite themselves to your spirituality that is so unique and fruitful. May it be so.

*Reflection given on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Foundation Monastery Pius XII, Fátima
by Fr. José Filipe Rodrigues, OP, Vicar of the Master of the Order
Friday 14 June 2024*