

***The Preaching of the Nuns - the Secret Fruit of Contemplation***

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Greetings from Fanjeaux, Saint Dominic's village in the South of France. (By the way, in case you were wondering, he is still here! We encounter him regularly as we come and go through the streets and the fields.)

I would like to take as epigraph for this talk a quotation from former Master of the Order Bruno Cadoré. In the letter he addressed to all Dominicans in January 2012, Fr Bruno used the term "evangelisation" to express the primary reason for the existence of the Order, for preaching is only the means to the end, the means used to bring about evangelisation. He goes on to explain: "Evangelisation is not first and foremost a question of ministry, but an invitation to a certain way of life." Is it not exactly in this sense that the nuns of the Order play their part in its preaching mission? For the nuns certainly do not have a formal preaching ministry, to be honest I do not think the majority of nuns wish for one, but it is indeed the option for "a certain way of life" - and a radical option at that - that makes of nuns evangelisers and hence preachers, according to the definition of Fr Bruno. The logic is evident: the purpose of preaching is evangelisation, and the purpose of evangelisation is the salvation of souls. This is the quintessence of the Dominican vocation and of all Dominican life.

So we can't speak of the "preaching of the nuns" in conventional terms and we shouldn't even try. Why? Because there is first and foremost the relation of nuns to the Mystical Body of Christ ...the mystical dimension of our way of life which cannot be put into words. *Perfectae Caritatis* and *Verbi Sponsa* speak eloquently of this as well as other sources.

We must not forget that every baptized person is called to preach, to preach Christ, to live Christ, (though sadly, we are not taught the meaning of this explicitly enough from our early years). Yet, what is it to preach? If we speak in the conventional sense of preaching as the dictionary defines it i.e. to proclaim or declare in public...then we can easily understand: public preaching of the Word *with* words as the friars are called to do. But also, wearing the habit, the witness and proclamation of life in common, the witness of a life of poverty, all of these constitute a direct and humble declaration, a sign pointing to God. It was Bishop Diego who enjoined on the papal legates that they must preach by word and example. And in this way St Dominic began to preach to the Cathars, meeting them where they were at, so to speak. And yes, miracles happened.

So we come to the question: is there a conflict between being a contemplative and being a preacher? As the nuns don't preach in the conventional sense, how do they live out this



dimension of the mission of the Order in the context of contemplative life? First of all, simply because they have received the mission of prayer in the heart of the Church. The prayer of praise and intercession in total gift to the Lord, such is their vocation and hence their mission. In the communion of saints, the Word of God which we welcome and desire to put into practice does not return to the Father without moving hearts towards salvation. The nuns are to be 'love at the Heart of the Church'... "I will be love at the heart of the Church" said St Therese doctor of the Church. Though coming from a Carmelite, this "rule" truly does apply to all who are called to the monastic, contemplative life. From the beginning, for the nun, it is a matter of a covenant of love, a radical consecration of love...to the very end it is a covenant of love, in eternity it is only love!

"By their fruit shall you know them" is a well-know biblical adage, and we must apply it to the preaching of Dominican nuns, as indeed to preachers in general. In our Order we speak of the fruits of contemplation and the communication of such fruits to others. We must bear in mind however that the transmission of such fruits is not an automatic process. As with the parable of the sower, certain conditions need to be fulfilled in order for the fruitfulness of the grain to be bountiful. In the case of the nuns, it does not suffice simply to lock oneself up in a cloister and then to go about ones own business, prioress, bursar, novice mistress, cook – or whatever it may be. There is a community dimension to contemplation as indeed to the transmission of its fruits.

St Athanasius refers to the "folly of preaching," which God ordained as the route to salvation for believers. And yet this is described as folly. As an Order of Preachers I think we understand this very well, we realize that you have to be not a little mad to undertake such a mission; and this is probably even more so in the case of the nuns. For the friars, who go out and preach in various locations, can often – but not always - see the fruits of their labours. They see the reactions on the faces of the congregation, they get feedback in various ways. They can sometimes be aware of having touched peoples' lives deeply.

On the other hand it is very rare, almost impossible for the nuns to know whether their form of preaching is effective; for theirs is a more discreet and often silent form of witness, bearing a fruit that remains mostly secret, but nonetheless real, for as Pope Pius XII said: "The life of the nun is totally apostolic."

Nuns should certainly not be like Victorian children, that is, "seen and not heard," or in some cases not even seen... Preaching is by definition a form of communication. If nuns are to be considered as evangelisers and preachers, there must necessarily be communication in some form or other. A praying presence that is totally unseen and unheard certainly has a value in the purely spiritual or supernatural domain. This might be the case for example with the way of life of Carmelite nuns, but to my mind it does not correspond to the charism of Dominican nuns.

The Holy Spirit 'loosens our tongue' when He wishes...and we share the Word, Whom we ponder and prayerfully study day after day, with the help of Our Lady, Mother of the Word and first of the disciples. We may do this in brief reflections offered to our Sisters in community; in writing; through art; in translation; in receiving visitors/pilgrims especially in Fatima or Lourdes, where hospitality for pilgrims from all parts of the world is part of the life of the community.

Interestingly enough, in the early times of the Order, the nuns were referred to as Sister Preacheresses, not as Dominican nuns. One can justifiably argue that at that time the term “Dominicans” was not in general use. Yet it is surely significant that at this early stage the identity of the nuns was associated with the preaching mission. Indeed before it became a formal monastery, the community at Prouilhe was known as the “Holy Preaching”, because this first foundation, besides housing nuns, served as a sort of refuelling station for Diego, Dominic and their group of preachers. And later on, the foundations of Dominican nuns that proliferated all over Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries were referred to in the local languages as “Sister Preacheresses”. Indeed the ancient university towns of Louvain and Antwerp in Belgium still have their “Predikerinnen straat” or “Preacheresses Street”. The nuns could easily have been called “Daughters of St Dominic” or something similar, but although their monasteries have long since disappeared through the various vicissitudes of history, the memory of these nuns’ association with the preaching ministry lives on.

The preaching of the nuns should always be collective, not individual; that is to say it needs to be a function of the whole monastic community, not just of certain individuals. (This is true of the friars also of course, but this community dimension is much more radical in the case of the nuns, as we shall see shortly when we examine some aspects of their constitutions). The desire of St Dominic that preaching should be by both word and example is crucial to the mission of the nuns, for they use words sparingly in a life comprised in great part of silence, that silence that provides the necessary nourishment for prayer.

So in what does the *exemplo* of the nuns consist – how does it communicate itself, how does it become witness, and hence how does it qualify as preaching and bear fruit? No one refers to Benedictine nuns or Carmelites as preacheresses – how are our nuns different – or how *should* they be different – maybe we aren’t always as different as we should be. Maybe we need to be more aware of what our specific mission is as contemplatives in the apostolic Order of Preachers.

This ecclesial mission is lived out in following St Dominic, who attracted women to the Order by a particular grace-filled fragrance, as St Catherine of Siena put it. This grace is that love of Truth which finds expression in the Word made flesh, and hence the importance of the scriptures in Dominican life. This Word is assiduously heard and studied, prayed and contemplated, releasing another fragrance, that of compassion for all those who thirst for happiness and pass by its source without even recognising it.

In considering the significance of the term preacheresses, it is important to be aware of the dangers of anachronism. In the 20th century, there was a temptation to imagine, given that Dominic founded a community of sisters before the foundation of the Order of Preachers, and that he introduced a certain number of innovations to the form of religious life that he founded, that he had in mind some form of mixed group of men and women, travelling through the countryside on itinerant preaching missions. And that subsequently the villainous friars and/or the villainous pope quashed this idea. Now, much as this vision of the past might appeal to those who have a certain notion of what liberty is, it is pure fantasy. Not only is there no evidence whatsoever that such was Dominic’s intention, but it is totally anachronistic both in the context of the period and indeed in the context of Dominic’s own life. He was essentially a man of the Church – and of course a man of his

time. Innovation is one thing, flaunting social convention and ecclesial discipline is something else.

On the other hand, it has been said from the beginnings that the Dominican Sisters support the preaching of the friars through their prayer and this is true, though it must not be interpreted in the sense that the intense prayer life of the nuns dispenses the friars from making much effort in that domain themselves. In addition to this support to the friars, they provide it to a wide spectrum of people by offering, through their chapels and guesthouses, places of prayer and silence to those who visit them and spend time with them. Thus their very communities themselves become a preaching. This is the simple way of looking at it, but the metaphysics run much deeper.

### *Preaching as a form of witness*

What we frequently hear these days is that the way of life of the nuns is in itself a form of preaching, and this is what I have been hinting at in this talk Yes, but... there are dangers implicit in this approach. Let's look a little closer at this problematic. If the monastery is surrounded by high enclosure walls, if the liturgy takes place in an inner sanctum invisible to outside worshippers, if the singing is pretty much inaudible, if all external functions – answering the door bell, the telephone, running the guest house or monastery shop are all fulfilled by lay helpers, the nuns can indeed be invisible. All hell might be let loose inside that enclosure, yet all may look serene on the outside. Fr Gerard Master of the Order wrote in a Letter offered to our Nuns for reflection in September 2019 “...however, when a nun refuses to speak with another nun, or deliberately ignores her presence, or worse makes life difficult for her...she is not promoting that vocation...”



Invisibility can cover a multitude of sins – and sins are collective as well as individual.

Indeed the constitutions of the Dominican nuns clearly state: “If the life of the nuns is a sign there must be a possibility of interpreting this sign.” That is to say, hidden should not mean invisible and silent should not mean mute. Again the Constitutions are quite unambiguous on this point. In paragraph 14 we read:

“In the various dealings of the monastery with neighbours, guests and others, the nuns should manifest a charity which, despite their hidden life, will form a bond of unity with them. This applies particularly to the prioress and other

nuns whose positions require more frequent contact with persons outside the monastery. But the whole community, united as it is in the love of the Lord, should become a radiant centre of charity to all.”<sup>1</sup>

Imagine – a call to collective “radiance” – now that is quite a challenge. It requires an enormous transcendence of self. Obviously it does not mean grinning from ear to ear the whole time, but there can be no question of grimacing at a sister across the choir. No

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<sup>1</sup> LCM para 14

slouching in your stall if you have a back ache. A way of life that can appear unnatural to some must necessarily challenge certain preconceptions when apparently “normal,” even “good looking,” young women are attracted to it!

And so our mission requires us to be “signs”. In this also we are commissioned by the Church, for if women who do not speak out in the conventional manner in front of a congregation can yet be called “preacheresses”, it is indeed their choice of a way of life that has something to say, to communicate: a life straining towards God through the hope and desire for eternal happiness in Him, and the mysterious fecundity of a life offered with Christ for the transfiguration of humanity. The centrality in the life of Dominican nuns of the Word of God in the Scriptures is a key concept here. The *sacra pagina* is the focus par excellence of our study, our celebration in the liturgy, our meditation and our contemplation. And, as we read in the prophet Isaiah, the Word does not return to the Father before having engendered salvation in the heart, it is in this that the efficacy of the nuns as preachers consists.

Notions of what constitutes preaching have evolved over time: Fra Angelico and other artists are now rightly deemed to have preached through pictorial representation, and this is indeed a form of communication. Nuns have always been active in this field also – more in fact than one might think. Monastic art is often associated with a mystical dimension - what do we mean by mystical in this sense? A mystic is essentially someone who has a capacity for an experience of God that he or she seeks to communicate to others. Without this element of communication, it is impossible to ascertain who is a mystic and who is not. It is normal that monastic art should seek to communicate something of the experience of God as lived by the artist in the monastery.

So what of art in Dominican monasticism? - remembering that Dominican monasticism is exclusively feminine (there are no Dominican monks, only friars). From the earliest days of the Order in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, we find nuns engaged in artistic and creative, intellectual pursuits, that were considered to be an integral part of the preaching mission of the Dominican Order.

If we take as example the Dominican nuns in the German speaking countries, we find women who were far more active in the artistic and intellectual sphere than the average laywoman of the day. It is well-known that monks and nuns illuminated manuscripts and Dominican nuns certainly did their share of this. At Zürich, a history of the Dominican convent of Oetenbach, written around 1340, reports that the sisters earned 10 marks a year for the newly founded community by copying and illuminating books. Creating art was an important spiritual need, as well as a source of income, and new forms of it, unique to women, Sister Books for example, developed as the number of monasteries of the order increased exponentially over the course of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Let us move on now to the Italian Renaissance and look at the amazing figure of Sr Plautilla Nelli, whose dates are 1524 to 1588, often referred to as the Painter Prioress of Renaissance Florence. who was in fact the first woman painter of any category to achieve fame in Florence, and was even featured in the famous work *Lives of the Artists* by Vasari. Her noteworthy talent still has the potential to inspire the modern mind; she was prioress of the monastery of Santa Caterina da Siena on the Piazza San Marco in Florence, founded in 1500. So she lived right next door to the convent where Fra Angelico had painted a century

before. And in her own monastery there were other sisters also noted for the high level of their artistic production.

The story of this painter prioress has to be situated in the context not only of the art world in 16<sup>th</sup> century Florence, but also in the wider context of Dominican preaching in that place and at that time. Sr Plautilla was a true disciple of the famous Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola, who sought to launch a widespread moral and political reform of Florentine society, in which art occupied a leading role. Savonarola affirmed the great value of religious art and the centrality of its content, and Sr Plautilla followed him in this. In a series of incisive declarations, the friar had exhorted artists to eliminate from their works all elements that in his opinion constituted distraction from the sacred themes or dangerous departures from the truth. Sr Plautilla's most famous work, the *Lamentation of Christ* which has been recently restored and much acclaimed, clearly illustrates the purity of artistic style and purpose that Savonarola promoted. She depicts the body of Jesus lying on a stone on the ground, with St John holding the body, Mary Magdalene embracing the feet, and the Virgin Mary kneeling on the ground nearby. There is nothing to distract from the intensity of this moment; the poignancy is palpable. Interestingly enough, Sr Plautilla Nelli features, along with other nuns of her monastery, in a work published by the Dominican friar Serafino Razzi in 1596. The title is *The History of Famous Men in Preaching and Theology in the Sacred Order of Preachers*. Note: "Famous Men in Preaching" and it includes nuns! Now I am not too sure that a Dominican writing a book with that title today would think to include nun artists...

On the whole nuns tend to be reticent or over modest about sharing the fruits of their contemplation, but besides preaching in the form of artistic expression, pictorial or literary such as we have just been talking about, I firmly believe that there is room in the life of the nuns for some form of verbal preaching. Within the life of the monastery, there is surely some scope for doing this, without breaking the law of enclosure or infringing the discipline of the Church. For example, a sister could very well give a very short preaching at Sunday vespers, whether the faithful be present or not; similarly at the office of vigils on the occasion of major feasts, if only for the edification of her own community. And of course these days a lot of monasteries regularly post biblical and spiritual sharings on internet and the social media. I believe that it is as yet too soon to evaluate this as a form of preaching, but in theory there could be great potential for nuns here.

I have a vivid memory of my own prioress, a woman who would shun a public preaching ministry and who has the greatest respect for monastic enclosure, "preaching" from the front doorway of our monastery. On the Feast of the Holy Rosary, she spoke, at their invitation, to a large group of lay Dominicans in Fatima for their world congress; the Master of the Order and many members of the *op curia* were also present and assembled in the front garden of the monastery. She spoke to them in a very relevant and gripping manner of St Dominic and the rosary. She didn't show a power point or a video but simply used as a visual aid the large statue of St Dominic and the Blessed Virgin Mary that stood there in their midst in the monastery garden. No rules were infringed, and this "preaching" was probably more memorable and more "salvific" than many a Sunday homily!

In conclusion then, historically there have been two radically opposing reactions to this subject. Firstly: "the preaching of the nuns?" Quite simply: "They don't". Secondly, often heard these days: "the Preaching of the nuns? They are the preaching". Both of these statements are simplistic, containing part of the truth but not the whole truth. We are all

familiar with the situation where a person laments: “I am of no use to anybody”. And such persons are frequently comforted by the response, “Ah, it’s not what you do, it’s what you are.” This reply is often proffered to the older relatives in a family. But let’s face it: the nuns are the elder sisters of the friars. Having been founded in 1206 at Prouilhe, they were ten years old when the friars were born in 1216. Now that is quite an age gap in any family – something to be considered as significant! Those who have older sisters may like to ponder on their contribution to the well being of their younger brothers, independently of any specific actions on their part. This is simply part of the dynamic of family life, but must not be taken for granted. All members of all families have responsibilities towards the other members.

Finally, we can be pretty sure that our Holy Father Dominic was in contact, constant contact, with the first disciple of Christ - His Most Holy Mother, who pondered all the Divine mysteries in Her Immaculate Heart. We cannot forget that She is the Queen of Preachers and Star of evangelization. Now, at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, we continue to live this same charism to the extent that we imitate Dominic as he imitated Christ.