

Dominic the Teacher
Mount Saint Mary College
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Good afternoon.

I know it is customary for speakers to tell their audiences what a pleasure it is to speak to them.

But I tell you that from my heart. I entered the Dominican Sisters in August of 1965. As a postulant and as a novice, I sat and prayed in this very chapel ~ well, I tried to pray.

In 1972, I graduated from Mount St. Mary College. I even taught for a year at the Bishop Dunn School.

Many of the Sisters who sit in this chapel today were my first mentors and examples in religious life. So ~ for me ~ today is indeed a homecoming.

And I offer my deepest gratitude to Sr. Agnes Boyle for inviting me to give this Dominican Heritage Lecture. She has honored me greatly by this invitation.

The title of my talk today is "Dominic the Teacher: An Authentic Voice for the 21st Century." Central to my message is this: Dominic's methodology ~ to teach by an intelligent rationale, to teach by explanation and not by dictum, to teach not simply through recourse to a hierarchical authority but by persuading his listeners to see the truth of his teaching ~ this methodology is precisely what contemporary teachers of the faith must employ in their catechesis.

Remarkable ~ even after 800 years ~ Dominic truly is an authentic voice for our time. Let us now take a look at why this is so. To make my case - I will need to be somewhat autobiographical.

What I plan to do first is to describe what I consider a crisis in the world of faith today. And, those of you who know me and my research interests will anticipate some comments about the Second Vatican Council.

Ever since that Council ended in 1965, the concept of evangelization has assumed a new importance in the self-awareness of the Church.

Vatican I, in 1870, used the term "gospel" only once. In contrast, Vatican II mentions the term 157 times, it uses the word "evangelize" 18 times, and the word "evangelization" 31 times.

Previously, evangelization had been traditionally understood as preaching the gospel to those who had not yet

heard it. But this understanding has undergone a significant development in the years since Vatican II.

Now it includes a "re-evangelization" of those who have already heard it.

An acknowledgement of this crisis is important for the main theme of my presentation today ~ that Dominic continues to serve as an authentic voice for the new millennium. The crisis in Dominic's time was the Albigensian heresy. The crisis in our day is that of religious illiteracy. And, I believe the very same approach Dominic took in his day is one that is desperately needed today.

I mentioned earlier that I entered the convent in 1965. Three months later, the Second Vatican Council would come to a close. I would go on to teach first and second grade for eleven years.

A graduate degree in theology from Fordham University would change the direction of my life. I would move on to teach theology to undergraduate students at St. Anselm College in New Hampshire.

In those early years of my teaching in the primary grades, my little students would look at me with stars in their eyes and would believe everything I said. The same cannot be said of my current students. I rarely see stars in their eyes and sometimes I wonder if they believe anything I say!

Still, I love teaching theology at the college level. For one thing, these students are at an age when they are making not only career choices and spousal choices ~ they are also making faith choices. Sometimes, I am even invited by them to assist in their faith journey. I can think of no greater privilege.

My teaching at the college level offers another incredible opportunity. For reasons beyond the scope of this presentation, today's church is suffering from a serious shortage of vocations to religious life and the priesthood, the very people who had been leaders in the evangelization process.

Who will step forward now and be the voice of the Good News for the 21st. century?

I believe those people can be found sitting in my theology courses each semester, in theology courses here at Mount St. Mary College, in theology courses everywhere. They are the future of the church.

They will be leading parishes and catechizing the people of God in the church of the third millennium. What a remarkable opportunity we have in preparing this new group of evangelizers.

However ~ serious challenges face those of us involved in this task. A good part of this challenge is related to that grace-filled moment known as Vatican II.

Three months after he was elected to the papacy, Pope John XXIII announced that he was calling for an ecumenical council ~ much to the surprise of just about everyone in the church.

After the First Vatican Council in 1869-1870 had articulated the teaching on infallibility, most thought there would never be a need for another council. Any future questions or concerns could be settled by recourse to the pope.

But John's reason for calling this council was different from the twenty ecumenical councils that preceded it. He saw the Second Vatican Council as an opportunity for an *aggiornamento*, an updating of the church.

It opened in 1962 and the bishops from all over the world met in Rome each fall for four years discussing matters at the heart of the Catholic faith. In the end, they published sixteen documents that touched on the very essence of the Catholic faith.

The Second Vatican Council has been called the most decisive ecclesial event of the 20th century. It produced a charter for the church of that century and the ones to follow.

Never before in the history of Catholicism had so many sudden changes been legislated and implemented which immediately touched the lives of the faithful. And never before had such a radical adjustment of viewpoint been required of them.

It was a moment of grace in the life of the church for so many reasons.

-Instead of continuing a hostile and suspicious attitude toward the world, Vatican II asked us to live in close union with our contemporaries, calling us to witness to the Gospel in today's world.

-Instead of regarding itself as spotless and all holy, the church acknowledged its errors, failings and sins and saw the need to continually reform itself.

-Instead of viewing the church primarily as a pyramid ~ with the pope at the top, followed by bishops, clergy, religious and finally the laity ~ it saw the need for all Catholics to work for the common good of the church and its mission ~ with no one in the church better than any other simply by virtue of one's vocation.

-Instead of emphasizing that salvation is to be achieved in the next world ~ the council called for the church to carry out its mission in this world and transform it by the grace of Christ.

-Instead of viewing other Christian churches with hostility and other religions as false, Vatican II called us to respect our brothers and sisters and ~ perhaps, in one of its greatest accomplishments ~ acknowledged that salvation is a gift that is offered to all of humanity ~ not only Roman Catholics.

And yet, theologians frequently refer to Vatican II as the greatest story "never" told!

Sadly, many of the very significant changes brought about by Vatican II did not reach the people in the pews. And that is one of the challenges we face as theology teachers today.

Year after year, students enter my courses with little or no knowledge of this remarkable moment in the life of the church.

For many of them, Vatican II is relegated to the same category as the Holocaust ~ simply another event in the history of humanity.

But this is unacceptable. Younger generations must not be permitted to view life-changing events as simply a story that is told in a history book. The human race is different (or should be) because of the horror of the Holocaust. The Catholic Church is different because of the Spirit-filled moment known as Vatican II.

In many ways ~ our situation is very similar to the one faced by Dominic in his time. As Dominic taught, he realized that not only were the lay people ignorant of the faith. Even the clergy were poorly prepared to evangelize the people. Seminaries would only come to exist after the Council of Trent in the 16th century.

He was the first to propose an order that was dedicated to preaching, at a time when no one but bishops regularly preached. (Dorcy, p. 4)

Dominican Father Bede Jarrett once claimed: "We have something to do in this world. If the work we are sent to do is not done, no one else will do it; there will be something missing in the plan of God. There will be an instrument silent in God's orchestra." (Vidmar, p. 52)

I thought about Dominic when I read this comment. Our history tells us that Dominic rose up to address the Albigensian heresy. This is the instrument Dominic would be in God's orchestra. And his plan to do this was not simply creative and original ~ it was revolutionary given his time in history. (Vidmar, p. 52)

Humbert of Romans was the fifth Master General of the Dominican Order. When reading a document that had been composed during the very early days of the Order, he noted that though

many reasons could be offered that would explain the formation of the Order, he claimed that the pre-eminent purpose was to preach, that this purpose set the Order apart from all others. He explains that a desire to defend the faith against heresy first moved Dominic to consider forming a new Order but once established, the intention of the Order was enlarged to encompass preaching in general. (Vidmar, pp. 3-4)

We may not have to face the Albigensian heresy in our day but religious illiteracy is a very serious challenge today. I think one reason lies in the failure of those of us in religious education to make the necessary adjustment in the way we taught the faith after Vatican II.

For those of us old enough to have lived in the church before Vatican II, we remember the catechism as the primary tool of religious education. As good as it was on many levels, there was a problem in the way we used the catechism. The knowledge of the faith was often reduced to the rote memory of the catechism answers.

In addition, the faith was conveyed in a language of obligation. A number of years ago, some authors put together a somewhat "tongue in cheek" book entitled Growing Up Catholic. It was an affectionate and rather amusing look at some of the practices in the church before Vatican II.

It opened up with a statement about the Baltimore Catechism. First, it listed the problem: How to educate young Catholic minds in the teachings of the Church and give them a solid grounding on which to build their faith.

Then it offered the solution: Design a book that puts together the most complex theological issues, the greatest mysteries of the faith and the ways and means of performing Catholic ritual, and make it understandable to a seven year old, even though most of the greatest minds of the ages haven't figured it out yet. Call it the Baltimore Catechism and make everyone memorize it.

This was followed by some sample catechism questions:

-Q: How many editions has the Baltimore Catechism had?

A: The Baltimore Catechism has had many editions, all of which are right and true.

-Q: How can you use the Baltimore Catechism?

A: You can and should use the Baltimore Catechism to lead a good Catholic life and attain heaven.

-Q: What will happen if you do not use what you learn in the Baltimore Catechism?

A: You will go to hell.

-Q: Why are Catholic schoolrooms crowded?

A: Catholic schoolrooms are crowded because each child is sharing her desk with her guardian angel.

-Q: Do Catholic school children ever get rewarded for being good?

A: Catholic school children often get rewarded for being good. Sister gives out prayer books, rosaries, scapulars and holy cards for good behavior such as not turning your head during Mass.

(Meara, Stone, Kelly, and Davis, pp. 13-14; 31-32)

Obviously, these were not real questions from the catechism ~ but they do give a sense of the spirit contained in those books.

The mature act of faith is really an act of love. Unfortunately, in the past, many of us chose to live in a certain way more out of fear of God than love.

In an attempt to move away from this juridical understanding of the faith, religious educators after Vatican II tried to make the faith journey a more "enjoyable" experience. Frequently, when there is a move away from one extreme ~ the pendulum swings to the opposite extreme. I believe we saw this in the years after the Council.

Religion classes became so "enjoyable" that students left their religion classes feeling good about themselves and their lovable God, but lacking in any solid grasp of the content of the faith.

The act of faith is a matter of the head and the heart. Simply put ~ one cannot commit to what one does not know. Today, forty-two years after the Council ended, we continue to feel the effects of a fragile religious education system.

This is another way that Dominic continues to be a voice for the 21st century. To prepare his followers for the task of evangelization, he sent them to universities, which was revolutionary for the time.

Dominic's program was planned first and foremost to give theological training. The vocation of the Preachers required this, and theological knowledge was absolutely necessary ~ especially given how such knowledge was lacking in the ecclesiastical world of Dominic's time.

The very first Chapter of the Order, convened by Dominic at Bologna, instructed the brethren to attend very seriously to books and studies.

The obligation to study was to be deeply impressed upon the novice from the moment he entered the Order. The Constitutions say: It is the novice master's duty to make the novices realize that they have to apply themselves seriously to study; that they are under obligation to read and reflect day and night upon what they have read.

In "The Book for the Instruction of Novices," examined and approved by the General Chapter of 1283, the novice is informed that after profession, his life is to be occupied with three things ~ spiritual exercises, study and the apostolate; and at considerable length, it makes clear to him how great is the importance of science.

In fact, an entire treatise is given over to the importance the novice must attach to the acquisition of knowledge, and the attention which, from the first day of his entrance into the Order, he must give to it. The cell of the Dominican religious was to be a sanctuary consecrated to the threefold service of study, writing and prayer.

The first two were to be dedicated to the service of God no less than the last.

While prayer was to be practiced assiduously, the spirit of austerity kept undiminished, the choral obligation discharged with unflinching fidelity ~ it was the spirit of study which was to permeate the entire life of the Order.

Blessed Humbert expressed this clearly when he said: "Study is not the chief end of the Order, but is eminently necessary for preaching and redeeming souls." (Mulchahey, p. 5)

Even today, one of the central components of the Dominican way of life is the dedication to study. In a recent letter from the Dominican International Preaching Committee, an important question was raised: "How do we encourage study ~ not for its own sake ~ but as an evangelization of the intellect?"

This is a powerful point and, as the Enlightenment thinker Denis Diderot once wrote:

"The mind can only acquiesce in what it accepts as true. The heart can only love what seems good to it. Violence will turn a man into a hypocrite if he is weak and into a martyr if he is strong ~ teaching, persuasion and prayer, these are the only legitimate means of spreading the faith."
(Bokenkotter, p. 263)

It was Dominic's belief that the purpose of the Order he founded was to minister in the world for the salvation of souls through the preaching of the Divine Word.

Hence, it would be necessary that his followers have every opportunity for growth in the spiritual life.

Thomas Aquinas gave us the phrase that would epitomize the two-fold mission of the Dominican teacher: "To contemplate and to give to others the fruit of our contemplation" ~ to be both a contemplative and an apostle.

John Henry Newman once noted that Dominic instituted an Order in which the pursuit of knowledge was to go hand in hand with the quest for spiritual perfection.

Ideally, the Dominican teacher should be a saint; at any rate, all theological study should be what theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar called: "theology on one's knees."

Dominic understood this only too well. He drew his strength from a profound prayer life ~ he knew that all teaching, all preaching must lead people to the Mystery who is God.

In this regard, Timothy Radcliffe, OP, former Master of the Dominican Order, has written: "The hope that makes us teachers of the good news is not a vague optimism, a hearty cheerfulness, a whistling in the dark. It is the belief that in the end we can discover some meaning in our lives, a meaning that is not imposed, but which is already there ~ waiting to be discovered." (Radcliffe, p. 58) Indeed, the mystery who is God.

To do this, both head and heart must be engaged.

And this is clearly a challenge for those of us teaching theology to undergraduates today. These young men and women are very good people ~ they volunteer their services to those in need, they believe in God, they pray.

But when you engage them with questions at a deeper level such as: How would you describe God to someone? What is the real meaning of Christian life? Why are you a Catholic? ~ they offer, for the most part, superficial responses.

One student told me she would like to go to confession, but she did not know the Act of Contrition. Another student who was teaching in a parish religious education program brought up the Hail Mary. When she asked her fourth grade class what that was, one student proudly told the famous story of Doug Flutie's "Hail Mary" football pass. Another interesting story is the one in which a Sister asked her high school students: "What is Vatican II?" One student responded: "Would that be the Pope's summer residence?"

Given all that has been said thus far, the audience might be feeling somewhat discouraged about the future of our church. I am not discouraged ~ for a number of reasons. For one thing, like Dominic, I am a student of the history of the church. Every generation is faced with challenges. Every generation has had to find a way to bring the Good News to God's people in a way that gives meaning to their existence. Every generation has had to find a language that gives life.

Dominicans are very good at doing this! As Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, OP has stated: It only becomes clear what is typically Dominican when Dominicans ~ following the example of Dominic ~ reshape "the old" and combine it with the dynamism of constantly new and different forms ~ and Dominic always reconciled the past with new possibilities for the future.

As we look back over the history of our Order, one thing becomes very clear: again and again new historical interpretations of religious life are added to already existing ones ~ interpretations that meet the needs of the time.

And this new interpretation is always given as a gift to the church by the prophets among us.

This was clearly the case with Dominic. His Order was a response to the needs of his day, a response whose originality was inspired by the life and teaching of the first apostles.

Jordan of Saxony tells us that Dominic petitioned Pope Innocent III to confirm for him and his companions an Order which would be an Order of preachers with no boundaries to its commission.

(Mulchahey, p. 4)

What the church needed in Dominic's time were preachers who would not suffer from certain restraints, who would not feel the pull of the cloister, preachers with sound theological background and preachers who could be trusted to represent the church's teaching. (Mulchahey, p. 9) This is precisely the need that Dominic's Order filled.

And, with an insight that we can only marvel at, Dominic foresaw that one could preach in many ways, not simply from the pulpit. (Dorcy, p. 4)

When reading about Dominic, this idea struck me particularly. I am a member of my Congregation's Preaching Committee. One of our primary goals is to encourage our sisters and associates to truly own the "O.P." after our names. We are preachers regardless of our ministries. We are preachers because we are Dominicans. Our own founder provided us with this mission.

We face many challenges today ~ as did Dominic. But we have in our founder a model teacher. His approach continues to be an effective one today. Dominic did not use coercion. He did not rely on ecclesiastical authority to prove the rightness of his position. Rather, he provided a practical and reasoned theology to instill an understanding of the Christian faith.

Dominic believed that if his teaching was theologically and intellectually sound, he could persuade his audience, he could bring them to the truth. Given the world in which my college students live, they need reasons to believe. And Dominic's

method of teaching meets that need. True, there are some mysteries of our faith that are beyond finite human comprehension, e.g., the Trinity, the Resurrection. But so much of the Christian story can be explained, can be understood as reasonable. We need to give this generation reasons to believe.

More than ever, we need to give this generation a desire for ultimate truth.

I so appreciate the motto of Mount St. Mary College: *Doce me Veritatem* ~ "Teach me the truth."

As stated in the College's Office of Mission Integration Booklet: "From the earliest days, a love of learning characterized the spirit of the Dominican intellectual tradition. The quest for truth is never final or complete." (p. 10)

This insight is another reason why Dominic is truly an authentic voice for the 21st century, a prophetic voice as well.

In the decades leading up to the Second Vatican Council, a theological distortion found its way into our faith tradition. Somehow we came to believe that we had a corner on the truth, that somehow we had managed to figure out who God was.

The way we used the catechism contributed to this kind of thinking. After all, the catechism was a book of answers and ~ given the prevailing ecclesiological mindset at the time ~ theological exploration was rarely welcomed. A number of our Dominican brothers found themselves disciplined by the official church in the years prior to Vatican II. French theologians Yves Congar, OP and Marie-Dominique Chenu, OP were doing what all good Dominicans need to do ~ explore the faith and seek to constantly renew the church.

But their efforts were met with serious disciplinary measures from church officials at the time. They were forbidden to teach, preach or publish any of their ideas.

The ironic part of this is that when Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council in 1962, these very men were invited to serve as theological experts at the Council and a careful reading of the documents of Vatican II demonstrates the influence of Congar and Chenu.

Like Dominic, these theologians had recognized a central theological concept: God is best defined as "Mystery" ~ not mystery like in a murder mystery that can be ultimately figured out. Rather, Mystery as a super-abundant richness and depth of meaning that is beyond the capacity of human comprehension.

So often in the past, we taught and preached from a worldview that imaged God as some computer czar in the sky ~ as a manipulator of the human condition. Many believed that all events in our lives ~ happy or sad ~ were simply the result of

"the will of God." We failed to accept that God is indeed Mystery.

And in times of trouble we found ourselves asking: Why has God done this to me? This has always been the wrong religious question and has always resulted in a warped idea of God ~ an idea of our own making. A personal example in this regard...this coming Monday will mark the fourteenth anniversary of my mother's death. That loss is as deep today as it was then. I remember how devastated my family was ~ especially my father. His grief was two-fold. He had lost his partner of forty-eight years. But something else added to his sorrow. Given his mindset, he believed that her death was attributed to God's will and it prompted him to ask over and over: "Why did God take her?" I knew he was asking the wrong theological question. Every semester I try to help my students with similar issues. But there I was ~ unable to help my own father because it was clearly not the time to give my father a theology lesson! A theologian is not without honor except in her own home.

So like Dominic, Dominicans are not the ones with the easy answers. Rather, we explore ~ in all humility ~ the difficult questions that are inspired by a passion for the truth.

"The true teacher is always humble. Dominican Jordan of Saxony said that Dominic understood everything through the humble intelligence of his heart." (Radcliffe, p. 71)

Although Dominic may not have left behind any books or documents, what he did leave behind as a living legacy was the Dominican Order. (Edward Schillebeeckx)

Their greatest contributions have been in the field of the intellectual life of the church.

This tendency goes back to the very beginning with Dominic. He knew that teachers of divine truth had to be well-trained in theology in order to be effective.

His move to send his men to universities resulted in the recruitment of many professors and students in those universities ~ men like Jordan of Saxony and Raymond of Pentafort.

In the years to follow, the Dominican family would witness the remarkable achievements of Dominicans like Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Catherine of Siena.

In more recent times, the church has been blessed by the contributions of Marie-Dominique Chenu, Yves Congar and Edward Schillebeeckx. And the sisters sitting here in this chapel could be added to this list.

Indeed, Dominic left behind an incredible living legacy in his Dominican Order ~ whose priorities have always been the pursuit of truth and the sanctification of human intelligence.

And from the very beginning, the Dominican Order has been marked by a deep awareness of the need for dialogue with the times. This was clearly Dominic's desire - to enable people to hear God's word within the context of their own reality. (Office of Mission Integration, p. 11)

The gospel is eternal ~ but there is always the need to provide a "translation" of it into the present tense.

Dominic left his Order with a very clear mandate: to give witness to a deeply reasoned faith ~ one that emerges from a solid theological foundation. Such a mandate requires us to be partners in dialogue with our world. It requires us to continue in Dominic's methodology, one that seeks always to find a language that gives life, a language that leads people to the Mystery who is God.

Traditional language does not seem to have the same meaning for young adults today. Many of them feel no particular need to be saved or justified. Many of my students speak of a loving God, kind and forgiving, a God who is always there for them.

But one does not sense that a relationship with God has made any real demands of them. They rarely use the language of discipleship or conversion.

Many Catholic colleges emphasize the prevalent call for justice for others and provide Spring break opportunities for students to assist others who are in need. But are we truly transforming our students on the basis of gospel values or are we settling for social justice programs?

How do we find a theological language that gives life without losing the essential meaning of the gospel? For many, Christianity has been reduced to a psychological faith, a kind of therapy ~ helping them to feel better about the world, about themselves. And, the basic metaphor is Jesus as healer and friend, the tolerant Jesus who makes everything okay...and not the Jesus of the gospels who makes demands on us. It is almost as though they picture Jesus as the Mr. Rogers of Galilee, walking around making everyone feel good. This is not the picture we get if we read the New Testament seriously. Authentic discipleship is about much more than feelings. In Mark's gospel, it is clear that to be a disciple is to suffer. Jesus asks his followers: "Can you drink the cup I am about to drink?"

The present state of evangelization offers numerous challenges. A true approach would involve two components. It would aim at conversion, bringing about a truly personal relationship with God, one that changes me, renews me, transforms me. Secondly, the experience of conversion would include the acceptance of some cognitive claims. In other words, the Christian faith is grounded in the truths of revelation. To be in relationship with God would require some

knowledge of these truths. We cannot give our hearts to what we do not know.

The New Testament witnesses to God's self-revelation in the person of Jesus. The Good News involves a doctrinal content. Christian faith must not be reduced to a general openness about God.

Dominic clearly understood this. We are told that he carried the Gospel of Matthew and letters of St. Paul with him always. And, he built his Order well, choosing such timeless objectives and essential means that the Order has never become antiquated. This is because he gave it a purpose that is perennial ~ the salvation of souls through preaching.

(Hinnebusch, p. 122).

In one of the Vatican II documents, we read: "The future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide future generations with reasons for living and hoping."

(*Gaudium et Spes*)

Given the many Dominican teachers over the last 800 years, I think it fair to say that our brother Dominic clearly provided future generations with reasons for living, for hoping, for preaching the Word of God and it continues today.

Dominican Father Henri Lacordaire maintained that the Order is but the immortal reflection of a man raised up by God.

I can think of no greater tribute to offer Dominic - who is indeed an authentic voice for the 21st century.

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