People have always explored the universe and wondered about its origin, its nature and its purpose. The answers of one age often became the springboard for the questions of the next generation. Even today there continue to be more questions than answers. When minds and hearts are encouraged to be free and to take risks, the results can lead in surprising directions.

St. Dominic appeared on the Catholic scene in the 13th century, when religious life usually meant living secluded in a monastery. From the beginning, though, he wanted his Order of Preachers to be knowledgeable as well as enthusiastic in their ministry. They needed to understand scripture and theology, and to be familiar with all the other arts and sciences of the day. So rather than restricting them to learning within monastic walls, he sent them to the universities in Europe’s new urban centers. They quickly grew in number as other young people were attracted to their way of life. They also grew in confidence because their contemplative study and life in community helped them grow in a love of learning while also learning how to love God and to love others.

Dominic’s dream was to take the good news of the gospel to wherever people needed to hear it. Basically, that meant everywhere! That’s why these early preachers were called itinerant: they were constantly on the move. Not only that, they always went as mendicants: they begged for whatever they needed and begged for the words that would help them share with the world all that they saw and heard: beauty and suffering, goodness and pain, abundance and misery, hope and terror, and the justice and love of the gospel. In prayer they called on the presence and companionship of God. This trust was a sign of courage and hope that others witnessed, and it made their preaching all the more powerful.

These early Dominicans were contemplative; that
is, their hearts and minds were open to pay attention to the signs of the times. We are Dominic’s disciples today. Even if we’re not “literally” itinerant, or on the road, even if we stay right where we are, it’s always possible to be contemplative in seeking a fuller truth. Add to that the skill of being critical thinkers: seeing more clearly, with the eyes of God! This is the source of the courage that’s required to look at every experience and all knowledge in the light of Gospel values. It’s also how to learn to love more truthfully, and to speak the truth with love.

One person who really stands out among the early followers of Dominic, as well as in the whole history of the Catholic Church, is Thomas Aquinas (1224-1273). We call him a saint now; during his lifetime he was a scholar, a teacher and a preacher. The creative genius of his theological writings, especially the Summa Theologiae, has stood the test of time for centuries! Like lots of scholarly works and spiritual writings, including the Bible, some people have quoted it or memorized parts of it without any understanding of the context. This is one of the reasons Thomas has often been misunderstood.

When Thomas entered the Order of Preachers his family was not pleased. They had hoped he would join a more prosperous, secure and politically influential monastic order. Instead he chose Dominic’s Order of Preachers because it was a movement dedicated to seeking truth and sharing it with others. In the 13th century, education was generally a privilege reserved for nobility and Thomas shared Dominic’s desire to have many learn of the gospel.

Besides his intellectual ability, Thomas was known for his holiness, compassion and kindness. His intense spiritual life inspired his theological writing, his poetry and hymns, as well as his ministry with people. His passion for truth led Thomas to engage in dialogue with wisdom wherever he found it, and he grew in a conviction that the mystery of the universe created by God was much greater and way more complex than previously understood by Christian theologians. This creative insight enlarged the church’s understanding, providing clarity and direction for future generations, right up to our own time.

This same creativity made Thomas the object of criticism and condemnation among his opponents, who considered themselves guardians of the tradition. They feared the intellectual openness of Thomas because he was always willing to accept new understandings, even those that challenged his own scholarly opinions. This is a sign of both genius and humility. Being faithful to the pursuit of truth provided Thomas with the conviction and confidence of a holy curiosity.

For eight centuries Dominic’s daughters and sons in the Order of Preachers have embraced this imaginative spirit, believing that God is present throughout all of creation. Dominicans are dedicated to sharing this vision as good news with the world. It frees them to see goodness, and to share it as a sign of God’s justice and love.

In the 21st century it’s more obvious than ever that truth is never complete. This is exciting and also daunting. There’s always more to know and understand, and that includes about our own spiritual tradition. Imagination and taking risks can be threatening and even a bit scary – especially when there are voices that promote certainty rather than curiosity. Remembering heroes like Thomas provides courage for seeking truth. His life demonstrated how it was possible to enlarge one’s world. He believed that demonstrating respect when crossing cultural, religious and intellectual borders enables questions to lead toward truth that was more important than answers.
Youth and Young Adults

At The Heart of Dominic’s Charism

- Community Helps us Pay Attention
- Prayer Is About Staying Connected
- Study...Who Knows Where It Can Lead?
- Preaching Takes Imagination, Simplicity and Grace
- Catholic and Dominican Means Bringing the Gospel to Life

Project Coordinators
Barbara Dannhausen, O.P., Director
Ruth Poochigian, O.P., editor

© Dominican Mission and Heritage, 2006