Dominican theologian and preacher Thomas Aquinas said in the 13th century that it is only after contemplation that we are called to action through love. In the 21st century, Dominican theologian and preacher Don Goergen describes the contemplative stance as “leaning on God.” Fostering the contemplative dimension of life is perhaps more challenging than it has ever been. Noise intrudes on silence. Expectations invade solitude. Immediacy sometimes appears to carry more weight than thoughtful encounters. Yet now, more than ever, contemplation must surround whatever action believers undertake. How else is it possible to avoid slipping into the temptation of reactivity?

“Pray always and do not lose heart.” (Lk 18:1.)

Easier said than done! For those whose entire experience of life has reflected what most observers would call luxury, comfort, and wealth, there is a perceived right to instant communication and virtual relationship. What is immediately apparent is that these have not necessarily led to improvement of the

Sun Surface Explosion
Catherine of Siena, Dialog, 25
human condition, nor are they suitable substitutes for silence, solitude, and thoughtfulness. People are “hungry” for help, says South African theologian Tshiphiwa Munzhedzi, OP, in reflecting on the basic issues of life they face. This is true not only for those who live in the Majority World. It is also necessary for those who have known primarily privilege.

Learning to see with God’s eyes is a necessary discipline. Learning to listen is essential. Out of these postures of respect the contemplative teacher, preacher, healer approaches those who are “hungry” for help and asks how the world’s hunger is being fed. In 2007 some estimate that 20 percent of the world’s population spends time in cyberspace while the rest of humanity dwells in unspeakable destitution. What does it mean when a virtual game announces, “We are competing with the real world to create a better place for your mind to live.” One result is to draw the privileged of Earth’s community to dwell in virtual realities, to focus attention on a culture that rewards notoriety, even to encourage investing in pure fantasy, spending real time and real dollars in an unreal world.

Reality can be “a better place for your mind to live.” The long-term effects of this approach promise longer lasting and more productive effects. Facing the reality of life on planet Earth may actually be more difficult than dwelling in virtual reality. This way of being helps the contemplative develop convictions about global peace and justice that depend on seeing and feeling, thinking and acting. In other words, pay attention and be respectful.

What kind of action can be seen in a life dedicated to “pray always and . . . not lose heart?” It will be a lifelong “work in progress,” a commitment to grow and change. This is also a source of the courage required for leaders who serve a community during periods of loss as well as growth. In one of her many letters Catherine of Siena wrote that the one who prays will be “encircled by the strength of God, who is Strength itself.” And Presence itself!

Contemplation is really about dwelling in the Presence of God and becoming aware of that presence as the ordinary goodness at the heart of everything. The strength and the presence of God made visible is what calls the contemplative to action on behalf of the world. The contemplative way of life integrates the whole self, both thinking and doing. Relying on the spiritual wisdom of Scripture provides perspective, words, and experiences. It is also a form of contemplative prayer and even worship.

Action often involves making a private conviction public. Welcoming strangers. Being inclusive. Facing pain. Understanding conflict. Protecting rights. Risking opposition. When these actions, these practices, come from the heart of a contemplative they embody the wisdom of a life lived with God, a life that places God’s creation at its center.

The contemplative way begins by dwelling in the mystery of encounter. Authentic action then promises to create unity. It may also lead to misunderstanding and conflict. This is a necessary posture if it leads to action on behalf of unity.

THE PREACHING MISSION CONTINUES

“ . . . preaching should proceed from the abundance of contemplation. Let this living relationship with God mark what is concrete in our life, and then we can speak about the ‘contemplative dimension of Dominican life’ . . . for preaching, a double contemplation must possess us: the contemplation of the street, which puts us in communion with the ever-present look of Christ, ‘who has pity on the crowd,’ and the contemplation of Jesus in the mystery of his love.” Vincent de Couesnongle, OP (The Contemplative Dimension of Dominican Life, To Praise, To Bless, To Preach: Words of Grace and Truth, Dominican Publications, 2004).

“As Dominican women we need to embrace more and more our theological vocation. People are hungry for someone to come and help reflect with them on the issues of life that they are faced with. Preaching in its varied forms is our charism. There is no way that we as Dominicans can neglect our vocation of being called to preach. It is our duty to discover our theological vocation, in all its different forms, if we are to preach effectively and start embracing it. We are all called to it.” Tshiphiwa Munzhedzi, OP ([South Africa] Building Bridges: Dominicans Doing Theology Together, Dominican Publications, 2005).
"We live in an expanding universe; we are evolving with the earth, with all creation. With the entire planet we are experiencing a dynamic transformation. Everything is moving from a Cenozoic Era to an Eozoic one. The journey has begun; a defining moment of grace is with us. We humans will need to work hard to reclaim 'right relationship' with all that exists, and as difficult and as arduous as the task may be, we must never lose hope. We must find the will to sing with the spheres and the desire to dance with the stars. And we must never forget that before anything came into being, there was an ancient love whose fire and passion will never be extinguished and whose embrace reaches out again and again to heal, to love, to gather, to welcome." Carol Dempsey, OP (Earth, Wind & Fire, eds. Carol Dempsey, OP, and Mary Margaret Pazdan, OP, Liturgical Press, 2004).

"The mission of Dominic is a mission of compassion. This Jubilee of the Order coincides with another important anniversary: forty years from the publication of the document Populorum Progressio (March 26, 1967). In the drafting of this encyclical our brother Louis Joseph Lebret (1897–1966) collaborated in a fundamental manner." Re-read this text, wherein are the traces of a profound spirituality of compassion. (International Dominican Commission for Justice and Peace, January 30, 2007.)

"Church and state are distinct from one another; each is supreme in its own sphere of competency. The Church has the duty of 'scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel' and to offer ... a global perspective on human realities. To be authentic, development must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each person, each group, and humanity as a whole." (Populorum Progressio, 13–14.)

FOR REFLECTION

What challenges stand in the way of leading a contemplative life?

How has contemplation called you to action?

ON AUGUST 8, DOMINICANS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD HONOR HOLY FATHER DOMINIC (1170–1221), FOUNDER OF THE ORDER OF PREACHERS, WHOSE COMMITMENT TO CONTEMPLATIVE STUDY AS THE NECESSARY PREPARATION FOR ITINERANT PREACHING SET HIS FOLLOWERS APART FROM OTHER SPIRITUAL MOVEMENTS OF THE 13TH CENTURY.