Words matter. That’s one of the first lessons in learning about the integrity of leadership. A second might be this proclamation from the biblical tradition: “Be not afraid.” Some version of this statement appears hundreds of times throughout both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. Why? It tends to appear at those times when there was some very good reason for an individual or a community to be fearful!

Truth makes itself known in many ways, some quite unexpected! Obviously the words of leaders make a huge difference within the life of any organization or institution, community or movement. At the same time it is readily apparent that not all persons who hold office are leaders, just as it is also true that “official leaders” often misuse their words in authoritarian ways. Words of conviction always matter; they’re harder to take out of context especially when they are spoken simply and directly.
Leadership cannot be vague. The challenge of dwelling in silence before speaking might be perceived by some as a sign of weakness or indecision in a world where political life, economics, and even religion appear to reward power. The Gospel, however, provides a portrait of Jesus who took time to dwell in solitude and silence before undertaking a difficult mission. This may be the most useful support available to a spiritual leader.

Catherine of Siena, in one of the many letters she wrote to persons who bore responsibility for leadership, provided this wisdom: “being brave about everything and not looking at personal weakness, trusting in Christ crucified that all things are possible.”

Dominic and Thomas Aquinas, exemplars in the Dominican tradition, are remembered for living by that same conviction. They encouraged not only asking for help from God in prayer, but also offering service. They understood that teaching, comforting, pardoning, and bearing with are all spiritual tasks of leadership. This kind of support helped to build the relationships that were necessary for them as leaders to have followers, or disciples, as they are commonly known in spiritual traditions.

Another deeply spiritual task of leaders is to question everything. The clarity of the questions, asked with humility and openness, invites everyone involved in the mission to believe more deeply in the value of their contribution, and to examine their attitudes about the common good. Do their actions in any way diminish others? What about the effects of their choices on all forms of life—animal and plant, as well as human; the physical as well as the intellectual; the economic, political, and spiritual, as well as the emotional and the artistic? None of these is beyond the sphere of interest or influence of the leader.

Every person who has a stake in the success of a mission has a story that needs to be known, to be told, to be heard. Knowing and valuing that story, being able to share appropriate interpretations of it encourages all to pay attention to the truth of their own lives. This builds a sense of solidarity, strengthening both integrity and spirituality.

Integrity and spirituality are evident in those who are committed to the hard work of practicing habits and skills that go beyond the already demanding expectations of professional leaders. Imagination, humility, and boldness are necessary. So is seeing how words and actions influence outcomes in a positive way. All are necessary and grow in proportion to the situations in which they are tested.

Seeing and believing that a mission, once borne with apparent ease by vowed members of the founding Order, is secure in the hands of a new generation of lay leaders is a challenge—both for leaders who are letting go of their responsibility, as well as for those who are embracing it. Integrating personal spirituality and professional practice is essential. So is honoring the memory of central aspects of the tradition while providing for appropriate reinterpretation in the present. Both present opportunities to grow in faith, to live in hope and “Be not afraid.”

The Preaching Mission Continues

“For us preachers, all words matter. All our words can offer life to other people, or death. The vocation of all members of the Dominican Family is to offer words that give life. All day long we are offering words to each other... Sometimes our words can be similar. We can give the impression that we are being truthful, just, or honest... while sowing poison. One motto of the Order is ‘Laudare, benedicere, praedicare,’ ‘to praise, to bless, to preach.’ Becoming a preacher is more than learning to speak about God. It is discovering the art of praising and blessing all that is good. There is no preaching without celebration. We cannot preach unless we celebrate and praise the goodness of what God has made... We will only flourish as a family of preachers if we make each other strong and give each other life. We must breathe God’s breath into each other, as Jesus did for the disciples.” Timothy Radcliffe, OP (To Praise, To Bless, To Preach: The Mission of the Dominican Family; To Praise, To Bless, To Preach: Words of Grace and Truth, Dominican Publications, 2004).

“It strikes me sometimes that ‘good’ theology may contain an aesthetic dimension, an inner beauty that of necessity will have consequences for one’s prayer life. The study of theology is an ever-living source on hand, not only for the transmission of the faith to others, but also for our own prayer life.” Else-Britt Nilsen, OP ([Norway] Building Bridges: Dominicans Doing Theology Together, Dominican Publications, 2005).
"We are accustomed to believe that God acted differently in biblical times. Indeed at the surface the narratives seem to suggest it. If we read more deeply we may come to reconsider that point. Our actions, when we have the courage to undertake them, are laced with confidence not so much because God fixes things for us but because we are in relationship with a loving but inscrutable God. Many aspects of our environmental lives might bear fixing by a super-authority, but the healthful presence in our environment operates in a much more subtle way. The invitation is . . . to collaborate in as many ways as we can with God at work gently in the ecosystem rather than to pin our fear or even our hopes on the dramatic pronouncement." **Barbara Green, OP** (*Like a Tree Planted*, Liturgical Press, 1997).

"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.)

"Organized programs designed to increase productivity should have but one aim: to serve human nature. They should reduce inequities, eliminate discrimination, free persons from the bonds of servitude, and give them the capacity to improve their lot, to further their moral growth and to develop their spiritual endowments. When we speak of development we should mean social progress as well as economic growth." (*Populorum Progressio*, 34.)

**leadership in the 13th century required courage. it was a time of war between the Germanic emperor and the papal states. Dominican friar John of Vercelli was widely known for his contemplative spirit and wisdom. he was a remarkable diplomat and peacemaker. he served as the 6th master of the order for almost two decades. in honoring him on December 1 we pray for wisdom in our own time of war.**

**FOR REFLECTION**

What words have really mattered in your life?

How are you able to praise, to bless, and to preach effectively in various settings?
Project Coordinators
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