Jesus was a teacher. His first followers learned from him how to question what they had been accustomed to accepting from the authorities of their time. He taught them that while power shifts and rulers come and go, it is truth that endures and can be trusted to challenge the dominant thought in any given time. Learning this puts Jesus' followers, then and now, in a precarious position.

To seek, to know, and to share. What more is there to say? The ways to engage in conversation among "the companionable presence of others" are numerous and way beyond what could be imagined even a decade ago. It's nearly impossible to "keep up" with all of the information technologies that are transforming the world for teachers and learners. Openness is important. So is the ability to discern limits. It is not possible (or necessary) for any but the specialist to stay on that cutting edge. What is possible is to be rooted in, and to keep returning to, the essential truth of God's dream for creation: the reign of life and of love where all can dwell together in freedom, peace, and harmony.

Great Nebula in Orion
Catherine of Siena, Dialog, 141
The biblical proclamation, "I am making all things new" (Rev 21) has given hope to generations of believers. For those who model their lives on the passion of the 13th century saint, Dominic, the newness promised in this biblical text may mean their own personal transformation resulting from being formed as both teachers and learners. It is a conviction that has remained at the heart of a lively intellectual and spiritual tradition for 800 years and it is experiencing a renaissance, even in the midst of the chaos and war of the 21st century.

What difference has the biblical teaching and preaching of Dominic and his followers made? Has it changed the world? Perhaps it is more important to ask this: Has it awakened a new awareness of where to stand in relation to God's Word and God's world?

Paying attention to how we and others experience life is a responsibility of teaching. In part because one outcome of learning is seeing differently. The precarious position of the learner is to imagine how it is possible to be at home in the world when so many are homeless. How is God's Word in any way relevant to the millions of refugees and internally displaced people—not only individuals, but whole populations—in the dehumanizing conditions of refugee camps where there is little food and constant hunger, and where clean water is nearly impossible to find. It is obvious that humanitarian efforts to provide health care cannot come close to providing what is needed. Here education is only a dim reality.

A desire to learn from the poor creates a unique openness. The teaching and learning that occurs challenges hearts and minds in ways that explanation fails to do. Beauty can be seen alongside ugliness. Living or working among the desperate and the destitute is beyond imagination for many. Those who risk this unbelievable poverty and loss must cast aside assumptions in order to see the signs of hope revealed and strategies for survival. It is a beauty that is both disturbing and revolutionary. To see this sign of the presence of God is a very different experience of "the companionable presence of others." It is what compels those who witness it to take some action on behalf of justice.

This call to action may begin with stunned silence and with weeping. When in teaching, preaching, writing, organizing, or some other creative art, each of these is an effort to convey what the contemplative has discovered: the desire of those who search for and dream of life.

Responding to truth may also need to begin with acknowledging some level of complicity. Teachers and learners, however, cannot simply dwell in that knowledge. In justice they seek ways to share it with others, imaginatively making that reality more visible, and so freeing both their imagination and others, humanizing all in the process.

The vocation of teacher and learner is woven together within each person who is claimed by the Dominican charism of preaching. It is an adventure to see more clearly the universe they share with all of creation and to honor it by keeping God's dream for the future alive.

The Preaching Mission Continues

"Our motto is truth. If it meant that we possess the truth, we would be guilty of arrogance. If we understand that we are pilgrims in the search for truth, we have begun to understand our vocation." Damian Byrne, OP (The Role of Study in the Order, To Praise, To Bless, To Preach: Words of Grace and Truth, Dominican Publications, 2004).

"We don't have to fear solitude, that is to say, the solitude that is created when you decide to be a person not officially recognized. I think that in our Dominican theological work, there exists by tradition, and because we were born like this, the companionable presence of the thirst of others, all those who search for and dream of life." Antonietta Potente, OP ([Italy/Bolivia] Building Bridges: Dominicans Doing Theology Together, Dominican Publications, 2005).

"A grateful heart will thank God for everything that is good—in my life or in the lives of others. A grateful heart will also read the signs of the times with an eye for what is best for everyone. My true self will be
grateful for the movement of the spirit that leads postmodern people to search for a new spirituality. My true self will rejoice with all those who benefit from the globalization of the struggle for justice. We can learn to be deeply grateful for the development of compassion and peace anywhere in the world. The truly grateful person will be pleased to discover that others outside of his or her own religious circles can teach him or her something about transcending one's ego. And above all we thank God for the discoveries of the new science, our expanding universe and the mystery of it all, that will give future generations such a great advantage over our generation.” Albert Nolan, OP (Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom, Orbis, 2006).

"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.)

"The hungry nations of the world cry out to the peoples blessed with abundance. And the Church, cut to the quick by this cry, asks each and every [person] to hear [this] plea and answer it lovingly.” (Populorum Progressio, 3.)

FOR REFLECTION

How have you been formed as a teacher and as a learner?

How has contemplation called you to action?

February 18 is the date when Dominicans remember Fra Angelico, contemplative, artist, and teacher. Honoring artists, and their arts has a long tradition in the Order of Preachers—and teaching itself is surely an art. It is said that the famous frescoes of 15th century Dominican Fra Angelico were intended as teachings to inspire devotion to a life of prayer in the hearts and minds of community members.
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