Meeting the Charism Again/For the First Time

Dominican Foundations

The

Contemplative

Tradition

Contemplata aliis Tradere
“to hand on to others what has been contemplated”
Inellectual Integrity and pastoral concern, sustained by a contemplative attitude, have always characterized the Dominican spiritual tradition. Practicing this way of life promises to change those who risk opening themselves to it. Everything is cast in a new light by a way of life that fosters union with God and prayer for others.

From its origin in the 13th century Dominic intended the members of the Order of Preachers to be grounded in what he called an assiduous study of truth and in a life of prayer and contemplation. Humbert of Romans, another 13th century friar and the fourth successor to Dominic, said "In order to preach well, in both word and deed, it is necessary to practice a contemplative life." In this way the preaching mission of the Order integrated contemplative study with active ministry.

The Contemplative Tradition is ancient and rich. It is also fresh and innovative. Some elements are universal and continuous over time; others are adapted and re-imagined in original and creative ways, as they are influenced by diverse cultures and in different ages. Christian contemplation has traditionally immersed individuals in silence and solitude, to be nourished by God’s Word and Spirit and to cultivate a life of prayer. Transformed by an intense and intimate experience, they are led by God back into the world of ordinary life and relationship to share their encounter with love and truth.

Contemporary Christian spirituality is rooted in centuries of wisdom, and is also being enriched and challenged by the spirituality of other traditions. Ecumenical and interfaith dialogues introduce Christians to the riches of different spiritual and mystical practices. The internet provides access for both religious professionals and ordinary seekers to ancient, exotic or new spiritual disciplines from world cultures that until now have been largely unavailable. Insights from the new cosmology are transforming the imagination and intelligence of the contemplative today and, paradoxically, sometimes pointing toward truths long held among ancient, non-western and indigenous traditions. As the pace of life in the world quickens and intrudes on interior peace, there is also heightened interest, even among those who are not particularly religious, in developing a more contemplative way of living that promotes the integration of body, mind and spirit.

Contemplation as a central element of Dominican spirituality has never intended to separate one or to create a distance from life; rather, its goal has always been to draw one more deeply into the mystery of life and there to find God. The 14th century German mystic, Meister Eckhart (1260-1325), is an exemplar of this Dominican contemplative tradition. His was an active life of teaching, preaching, prayer and study, which also included periods of service in leadership. He was mentor and spiritual director to many, including convents of cloistered nuns, and under his influence there was a flourishing of the mystical life among these women. Eckhart’s writings consistently focused on the presence of God, pointing toward what already exists in the the union of the human and the divine. "All that God asks is that you go out of yourself and let God be God in you."

Such a contemplative spirit deepens over a lifetime, until it becomes a dimension of who one is and the perspective one brings to all circumstances. Everything is cast in a new light by a way of life that fosters union with God and prayer for others. The inner life affects all outward behavior. It is the energy that enlivens the theologian’s quest and the disciple’s passion for mission.
A Dominican contemplative spirit contributes to the intellectual, aesthetic, and religious life of the world when it offers an integrated perspective on reality. Life is experienced in all its fullness right here, right now, in the present moment. It is in the present that one experiences union with God, and it is awareness of this union with God that enlivens the human spirit and enlarges the capacity to experience life more attentively and to serve others more generously.

The focus of Dominican preachers and teachers for nearly 800 years has been to enter into dialogue with the changing culture wherever they are, to learn from it and then, in humility, to determine how best to respond in serving the needs of that particular time and place. Styles of ministry that were effective in one culture or that worked in the past often prove unsuitable in different circumstances. The wisdom of integrating contemplative study with the message of the gospel encourages freedom in adapting to present needs.

This contemplative stance is increasingly needed in a world of rapidly changing demographics and geopolitics, no longer isolated by the borders and boundaries of language and culture. The intention to make every word and every deed a form of contemplative engagement, and a way of being more fully present to God's Presence is the goal of Dominican teaching and preaching, community and ministry. Vincent de Couesnongle, O.P., 83rd Master of the Order, once called it a "contemplation of the street...an attentive looking at all that surrounds us." Hope in new possibilities rests upon this contemplative way of seeing as it opens the preacher to a spacious, wide and deep capacity for embracing newness and otherness.

The prayer and study that forms and informs any Dominican enterprise both support and rely on the principles and dynamics of a democratic and collegial life. Dominic created for his Order a common life, which provided for these essential foundations of the preaching mission. It is embodied in the way teachers and preachers, scholars and writers, artists and musicians, mystics and social activists are present to God's Presence wherever they find themselves.

A growing consciousness of oneness in the universe challenges inadequate knowledge and whatever is restrictive in the boundaries of religious traditions, politics and economic structures. This awareness, along with genuine humility, invites a deeper understanding of the spiritual authenticity in other cultures. Literature and the arts, history and theology, sacred spaces and liturgical seasons, customs, moral actions and beliefs are all profound opportunities for crosscultural and interreligious dialogue. Engaging with others who share a similar contemplative openness offers the hope that each will be led to new perspectives, mutual respect and understanding.

Dominican spirituality cultivates the discipline of contemplative listening and a spirit of generosity. It approaches knowledge and experience with a hospitality that permits gifts of wisdom to be graciously shared and gratefully received. Contemplata aliis Tradere is a time-honored tradition, which unleashes the power to reveal new and fresh understandings. Everything is cast in a new light by this way of life because it fosters union with God and prayer for others.
THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION... promotes union with God and prayer for others.

"In preaching, the seeker and the sought come together, the lost and the found. God finds us in the midst of our own words and God's presence never leaves us.”

Don Goergen, O.P.

"...shaped by study, creativity and imagination and exposed to the powerful warmth of the Holy Spirit, we become aware in varying degrees that we all are called to be Dominican mystics who preach.”

Margaret Ormond, O.P. S.D.I.

"The traces of God's holiness lie in everyday life; true spirituality consists in openness, attentiveness and the capacity to be touched.”

Erik Borgman, Dominican Layty

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

We promote the integration of contemplation and action.
- How do we demonstrate consistency in beliefs, values and behavior?
- What do we identify as the contemplative dimension in all of our efforts?

We provide opportunities for education and reflection on the values underlying our mission.
- How do we articulate mission in light of local circumstances and an evolving reality?
- What expands public awareness of our contribution to the common good?

We endorse coherence between mission and implementation.
- How do we encourage professional development and improved practice?
- What is respectful and appropriate in the service we provide?

We expect decision-making to be informed and thoughtful.
- How do we practice care for self, others, the environment, and ideas?
- What ensures the integration of skill and understanding in leadership efforts?
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Additional resources for
"Dominic's Charism"
include the following:

• Matthew Fox, Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation
• Bernard McGinn, ed., Meister Eckhart: Teacher and
• Mary O'Driscoll, O.P. ed., Catherine of Siena:
  Passion for the Truth, Compassion for Humanity,
• Richard Woods, O.P., Mysticism and Prophecy,
• Spirituality, 6 issues/year,
  www.dominicanpublications.com

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