Meeting the Charism Again/For the First Time

Dominican Foundations

Dominic's Charism

To praise. To bless. To preach.
WHAT IS IT that makes the memory of a person or a practice endure and live on in a vibrant tradition? In the story of Jesus the Christ, it began with a gift that was given and received: the mercy of God. Jesus shared the gift of this love and truth with his followers, teaching them to be extravagant in sharing it with others even unto death, and their lives were transformed by this living and life-giving Word of Truth.

WHEN DOMINIC DE GUZMAN (1170-1221) founded the Order of Preachers, or Dominicans, at the beginning of the 13th century the world he knew was in turmoil. Europe's agrarian population was shifting to urban centers, creating waves of change that affected all of life, including economic and social relations, politics and religion. Universities established in these new urban centers were attracting the interest of the new generation and the attention of Dominic as well.

Amid the chaos and insecurities of his time, with religious and civic life mired in corruption, Dominic's conviction was that people needed to hear preaching that was authentic and true to the gospel. He believed that this preaching needed to offer people a genuine understanding of their real concerns as they struggled to adjust to the rapidly changing circumstances surrounding them. Above all, the preaching had to focus on the truth of God's mercy and love. This meant that it had to come from persons whose lives were firmly planted in the word they proclaimed.

The passion of Dominic's life became the centerpiece of his way of life—to preach the gospel wherever its good news needed to be heard. He created the vision of an itinerant Order that would go wherever people needed to hear the good news. He also believed that for this preaching to be authentic the preachers needed the support of a communal life where they could pursue constant prayer and continual study, embracing the voluntary poverty of a mendicant life, begging for the needs of the community and for the words needed for preaching. Dominic believed this gathering itself would be a holy preaching. In every generation since then others have followed this same path, and it is in this sense that Dominic's charism is a living tradition.

A charism is a gift of God's Spirit given to some for the sake of others.

ACCORDING TO THE TRADITION that has been passed on from those who knew Dominic, he was a joyful friar. Wherever he went, he conveyed an enthusiasm for the gospel. People found this inviting because it offered them hope. Dominic shared his intense desire to know God more deeply, and his own devotion to prayer and study gave witness to this.

To ensure that they would be grounded intellectually and theologically, Dominic sent his friars to the universities to study. He believed that having a solid foundation in the authentic word of God would stir up a passion for justice and focus their preaching to the needs of people. The presence of the friars among the teaching and learning communities of
their day, along with their enthusiasm for the gospel, attracted new members, who were eager to join the Order which had been founded “to be useful to others.”

This was the gift, the charism, given by God. True to its nature, a charism is a gift of God’s Spirit given to some for the sake of others. Dominic shared his passion for preaching with those who followed him, and they continue to hand it on from generation to generation. Today the Dominican charism finds diverse expression within a large extended family system that can be found on every continent and in over 100 countries. The persons and groups called to mission by the inspiration of Dominic reflect many of the same characteristics and behaviors of those who preceded them in earlier generations. They add new and creative contributions to the unfolding story of how a tradition that was born of the imagination and passion of one person continues to enliven a preaching mission today.

The rich history growing out of Dominic’s charism has deep roots and many branches. The stories that are remembered and that make up its tradition tell of ordinary lives and extraordinary events. They carry a living memory of communities, ministries and accomplishments, as well as rituals, symbols and practices long honored in the tradition. For nearly 800 years, women and men have found ways to imitate the common life that Dominic modeled on the life of the apostles described in the New Testament. It continues to be a life rooted in contemplative prayer, study, community and ministry, all for the sake of a preaching mission.

**NEW EXPRESSIONS** of Dominic’s charism are taking form today. Some people are meeting the charism again after first encountering its intellectual and spiritual tradition through schools, parishes, retreats, religious formation, scholarship and the arts. Others are meeting the charism for the first time through institutions, organizations, movements, and media inspired by the values of Dominic’s preaching mission. Laity are partners with vowed religious in creative new ventures. As electronic communication rapidly spreads news of these developments around the globe, the reality that is the Dominican Family is renewed and receives new life through this virtual sharing.

Friars and nuns, sisters and laity; young people and adults; communities and institutions; organizations and movements; artists and pastors; administrators, teachers and scholars; healers and spiritual guides; advocates for the marginalized; missionaries and martyrs. Their shared enthusiasm comes from a common desire to nurture the gifts given to them so they can be “useful to others” and because their lives are being transformed by preaching a living and life-giving Word of Truth.
DOMINIC’S CHARISM ...
is alive in the zeal of a vibrant preaching mission.

"Let God speak in you so that you can speak God for others; be silent and wait for God’s Word"

Meister Eckhart (1260-1327)

“For us preachers, all words matter. All our words can offer life to other people, or death.”

Timothy Radcliffe, O.P.

“The injustices of our day compel us to place the charism of preaching at the service of the poor and powerless. The Dominican prophetic message, rooted in experience, study and prayer, will move both preachers and hearers of the word to act for the transformation of oppressive structures.”

Kaye Ashe, O.P.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

We commit our resources to the mission of preaching the gospel wherever it is needed.

- How do we assess societal factors and determine the appropriate allocation of our human and other resources?
- How are we attentive to the way our programs and organizations affect society’s most vulnerable members?

We embody Dominic’s charism when our preaching is grounded in Truth.

- What learning experiences must we provide for all who share responsibility for our mission?
- What standards have we established to promote the effectiveness of our efforts?

We encourage creative expressions of the gospel so that its message is both authentic and fresh.

- How do we demonstrate our willingness to engage in dialogue?
- What evidence points to our willingness to change and adapt?

We promote an organizational culture that conforms to the gospel message we preach.

- How are we most clearly identified as participants in the preaching mission?
- What commitments to this mission do we expect of all within our organization?
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Additional resources for “Dominic’s Charism” include the following:

- http://www.op.org
- http://www.domlife.org

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Dominican Designs, Joan Smith, O.P. (Sparkill)

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2nd printing

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