"Love is the ultimate source of all we know, since we truly learn only what we want to know in some way."

Thomas Aquinas
LOVE OF LEARNING has the power to build a community of faith and hope. This is the experience of those who have shared a common desire for Truth, for God, who is the source of all life. A love of learning characterizes the spirit of the Dominican intellectual tradition. It is evident in an openness to seeking the fullness of truth wherever it is revealed, and to look for it as well in places where it may presently be obscured.

Dwelling first in the gracious word of God leads into the mystery of human life and a reflection on our place in the universe. Each of these is a privileged place for encountering truth and making new discoveries. A deeper understanding and a deeper faith are the outcomes. Those who dedicate their lives to such learning know that this is a pathway to struggle as well as to joy, and demands discipline even as it benefits from being open to spontaneity and surprise.

Being drawn more deeply into the mystery of God, the learner is also drawn more deeply into sharing in the passion of God’s love for all of creation. An unexpected consequence is often arriving at insight and discovering that it may not actually resolve questions; it raises new ones! The quest for truth is never final or complete. Over and over, deeper and deeper, it leads into the mystery of life.

For disciples of Jesus it leads also into the meaning of Christ’s life, death and resurrection for us. Both scholars and students discover that the outcomes of this quest for truth are always filtered through the personal and social preoccupations of their particular moment in time. The changes brought about in both personal and communal understanding by new insights rarely take effect immediately; profound change happens slowly, over time, as insight and meaning are gradually internalized.

IN THE EARLIEST YEARS of the Order of Preachers, the German friar Albert stands out as an exemplar of this passionate spirit and love of learning. As a scholar, Albert exercised such influence that he was recognized as “Great” even while he was alive, an unusual honor. When Albert first encountered the charisma of the new preaching mission, and felt called to Dominican life, he was a young student of science. During his years as a Dominican friar, Albert quickly developed a reputation as an extraordinary teacher and preacher. The breadth of his scholarship and vision, and the depth of his spiritual life made a lasting impression on those who encountered him at the universities. He was also widely recognized as a valued companion and colleague, teacher and preacher in Dominic’s new Order. Albert’s intellectual contributions have had a lasting influence on all who are inspired in their teaching and learning by this remarkable person, known for his holiness in community and his generosity in sharing both knowledge and wisdom.

It was Albert the Great who is credited with encouraging Christian scholarship to be in dialogue with other philosophies. His enthusiasm in the early 13th century for pursuing study of the writings of Aristotle (b. 384 B.C.) came from recognizing the comprehensive grasp of reality this early philosopher had. Albert had the courage to trust his conviction that such study was a worthy endeavor, even though church officials considered the early Greek philosopher to be highly suspect.
Albert and his even more famous student, Thomas Aquinas, shared the belief that in the search for truth, certainty could actually be an obstacle to faith. Their boldness, along with their humility, as teachers and preachers established in the Christian world a legacy and a model for integrating faith and reason. Teaching and learning that are true to this spirit of the Dominican intellectual tradition knows no limits and resists the temptations of absolutes; it follows the truth wherever it leads.

Such learning is a privilege and it is also an adventure. When it leads to some newly discovered truth, it inspires awe and energizes the imagination to look further, to engage with other dialogue partners, to listen and observe, to explore new territories among new companions. The limitations of previous boundaries are challenged by fresh ways of seeing reality, often requiring a change in both perspective and behavior. This is never easy and can be quite painful.

The goal of learning is not to possess truth. The legacy Dominicans claim, rather, from a tradition of nearly eight centuries, is the boldness and humility, imagination and persistence that they bring to bear in the pursuit of truth. Even when it means letting go of long cherished assumptions in favor of previously unimagined possibilities, this is where a love of learning leads a committed learner.

This legacy has inspired all kinds of Dominican projects, movements and institutions, and is embodied in them today. It is also the legacy that is handed on to others who engage with them in partnership as companions and colleagues, teachers and learners.

When the best of the Dominican intellectual tradition is honored in putting on truth, the outcomes are unpredictable, and also promise to lead into the mystery of ongoing and deep interior change. This is the foundation for sharing in the preaching mission of proclaiming the justice and peace of God's reign. This is also how a love of learning has the power to build a community of faith and hope.
"A love of learning... characterizes the spirit of every Dominican project.

"Dominican community provides companions for teaching and for being taught."

Albert the Great, O.P. (1207 - 1280)

"Central to any true study is that deep humility which exposes one to people who are different. It is initiation into a conversation that began before and will continue after we are dead."

Timothy Radcliffe, O.P.

"We need to be students if we are to be preachers. As Dominicans, we are to be students of the Book: the Book of Scripture, the Book of Creation and the Book of Life. We need to be able to penetrate and plumb the depths of all that is being written and done in our world today and see how it relates to, amplifies or contradicts the Word of God. We need to be able to put aside distractions and distortions, and concentrate on where God is manifest, especially in the most unlikely places."

Margaret Ormond, O.P.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

We foster intellectual development, spiritual maturity and social commitment.

- How do we promote individual and communal learning in a diverse and respectful environment?
- What disciplines do we practice that foster the pursuit of truth and delight in learning?

We promote an understanding of earth's community as part of a larger universe.

- How do imagination and skill contribute to seeing and addressing issues of justice?
- What initiatives do we take to resist fragmentation and to heal division?

We trust the partnership of critical thinking and loving hearts in the process of learning

- How do we demonstrate respect for insights that challenge present practice?
- What risks do we take in the search for a fuller truth?

We desire to learn whatever is necessary to participate in the common good.

- How do freedom and intellectual integrity help us contribute to a just world?
- What convictions underlie our commitment to a shared mission?
Meeting the Charism Again/For the First Time
is a project coordinated by
Barbara Dannhausen, O.P.
Ruth Poochigian, O.P.

Additional resources for
“A Love of Learning”
include the following:
• Thomas O’Meara, O.P. A Theologian’s Journey, Paulist Press, 2002.
• Dominican Designs by Joan Smith, O.P. (Sparkill)

• http://www.domlife.org

Dominican Mission and Heritage, 2003