Meeting the Charism
Again/For the First Time
Dominican Foundations

The Many
Forms of

Preaching

"Preaching is the art of naming grace in the midst of human experience."
Mary Catherine Hilkert, O.P.
A PASSION FOR GOD and a conviction that God’s love was meant for all characterized the preaching of Dominic de Guzman in the 13th century. When he founded the Order of Preachers Dominic was committed to preaching that would be effective. His desire was to help people hear God’s word within the context of their own reality, and his devotion to prayer and study as the necessary preparation for preaching ensured that the words he spoke would reflect the Truth of the Word. Dominic’s approach and his commitment to truth stood out at a time when many people were being influenced by religious teachers and movements that distorted the gospel’s good news.

Dominican theologian Mary Catherine Hilkert frequently engages teachers and preachers in reflecting on the theological and spiritual foundations of their ministry of the Word. She knows well that preaching is practiced in many settings, only some of them liturgical. Just as often, she says, it occurs “in the sacred space of the encounters of our ordinary daily lives and relationships where we speak words of love, foster hope, make commitments, grant forgiveness, take stands, and give witness. These ‘words of truth and life,’ and the deeds that embody them form the basis for hearing and speaking words of God. In naming grace believers make visible or audible the mystery of God out of the depths of human experience.”

Although Dominic neither founded a school of rhetoric nor wrote a treatise on preaching, he did send his young followers out to preach, just as Jesus had sent his disciples. The circumstances of Dominic’s historical time were different from ours, and yet in some ways remarkably similar to our own. He would hear an echo of his own voice in Hilkert’s observation that “Most of the people in our world who hunger for the good news of salvation or liberation are not to be found in our churches. If preaching is a matter of making connections…enabling people to hear the gospel as good news for them,…then the gospel and its preachers have to meet people where they are.” This is the task of every preaching project today: to create ways for people to encounter the gospel message wherever they are, so that it can help them shape lives that have personal and social integrity.

When there is energy and imagination for this preaching mission it takes new and creative forms and has the power to touch hearts. The heart of the preacher is awakened to a passionate “eloquence,” as it was called by the great 19th century French Dominican, Henri Lacordaire (1802-1861). The hearts of those who receive the preaching are awakened as well, nourished by the Living Word, which offers them hope.

THE ARTS HAVE A UNIQUE WAY of engaging the whole person, inviting a response of profound knowing. They have always been a way to express, interpret and enter into the mystery of God. Every culture and every age contributes to new and distinctive ways of naming the world and interpreting its relation to the God of creation and the gospel of Jesus. Through the use of language, color, material, music and movement, artists of all kinds create works in every medium imaginable. Their creations capture the imagination and have the power to evoke insight, conversion and faith.
The genius of two early Dominicans produced works of theological interpretation that have inspired preaching in every generation since. Thomas Aquinas is remembered for his writing, including his great theological synthesis, or summa, in the 13th century, as well as for his preaching and teaching. Two hundred years later the visual images created by Fra Angelico presented another kind of theological summa. Though he is not often remembered for his words, this 15th century Dominican artist is quoted as saying “To paint the things of Christ one must live with Christ, and preach to those who love art but know nothing of God.” The work of each is a form of preaching. Both give eloquent testimony to the variety of forms that preaching takes when it is naming grace in the midst of human experience.

**REACHING IS A GIFT.** It proclaims the story and memory, the presence and grace of the Living Word. It is also a sign of God’s ongoing presence, God’s desire for continuing creation, life, mercy and love. It fulfills its mission, Hilkert says, when it describes relationships, offers perspectives, reveals how worldly Christian love is, and how concrete it is. The preacher who dwells in the presence of the Living Word seeking God’s Presence, enters a life-giving rhythm of receiving and offering the truth of God’s justice and love in word and deed and relationship.

**THE DOMINICAN MYSTIC,** saint and Doctor of the Church, Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) is remembered for engaging in many forms of preaching. She is one of a small number of women in church history who were recognized by many because of their effectiveness as outspoken teachers, preachers and spiritual advisors. It is only in the last half century that women have been widely accepted as scholars and teachers and preachers. In these early years of the 21st century preachers are, more often than ever before in history, women. A woman’s way of naming grace in proclaiming the gospel presents an interpretation of human circumstances from the unique perspective of her gender, her experience and her sensibilities. Dominican women bring the added perspective of formation in an intellectual and spiritual tradition nurtured by a life of prayer, study, community and ministry.

Nations and peoples co-exist today in uneasy and fragile alliances, just as they always have. What is new, perhaps, is the rapidity with which information, money and power move around the globe, often leaving the economies of nations devastated, morale depleted and freedom threatened. Truth and love demand naming these violations of human dignity. When preaching is authentic in doing this, it can empower individuals or whole communities to resist exploitation and contribute to the dialogue.

The future of the preaching mission is beyond our present comprehension, and may even be beyond our wildest imagination. Still the spirit of Dominic urges the use of every of talent, skill, medium and voice to bring the authentic Word of God and its preachers to meet people wherever they are.”
THE MANY FORMS OF PREACHING ...
lead preacher and community into the mystery of God.

“Eloquence is the sound which a passionate soul makes.”
Henri Lacordaire, O.P.

“Our words are the reverberation, the prolongation of the Word spoken to us. Our prayers are God, praying, blessing, praising in us.”
Timothy Radcliffe, O.P.

“Preaching calls one to live at the heart of mystery.”
Ed Ruane, O.P.

Questions for
Reflection and Discussion

We proclaim the good news of God’s presence in word and deed and relationship.
• How do we encourage the identity of preacher among all within our organization and community?
• What evidence do we have that others understand our efforts as part of a preaching mission?

We integrate God’s Word with human experience to think in new ways and to love as God loves.
• How do we make use of every activity as an opportunity for critical reflection?
• What disciplines and arts do we cultivate so that the preaching mission continues to be relevant?

We participate in renewing the face of the earth, by renewing our own hearts.
• How do our efforts contribute toward personal and social change?
• What resources can we use for imagining alternatives?

We seek signs of God’s grace throughout the entire cosmos.
• How do we practice naming grace in the particular circumstances of our context?
• What partnerships help us deepen our knowledge of the interdependence of all creation?
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Additional resources for
"The Many Forms of Preaching"
include the following:

• Aquinas Institute, In the Company of Preachers,
• Guy Bedouelle, O.P., St. Dominic: The Grace of the Word,
• Mary Catherine Hilkert, O.P., Naming Grace,
  Continuum, 1997; Speaking with Authority, Paulist

• http://www.domlife.org

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