Meeting the Charism Again/For the First Time

Dominican Values

Exercising Justice

“Love of neighbor, love of God, caritas, without justice is a lie; justice is an empty word if it does not lead to establishing a just and social political order.”
Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P.
Imagination and perseverance are necessary for exercising justice in the 21st century; they have always been needed. Reading the history of nations and religious movements, studying the lives of thinkers, leaders and creators, tracing the evolution of concepts and theories, analyzing the practices of institutions, communication and commerce makes this abundantly clear: when imagination and perseverance are united with faith the insurmountable becomes imaginable.

Exercising justice begins with being just, even if individuals and groups are not always just. Scholars and teachers, artists and activists, politicians and scientists, preachers and healers have stories to tell of actions and relationships and movements. In this remembering they give witness to the role of imagination in exercising justice and inspiring new initiatives. It can be difficult to grasp what the concept of justice means, and even more difficult to claim it as an ideal and a value. Justice establishes a norm for reviewing every assumption and decision: Does this reflect the good life promised in the gospel; a life that is good for all?

In the person, the remembrance and the ongoing presence of Jesus the Christ, humanity has a constant reminder of how justice looks. This enduring image inspired Dominic’s preaching mission nearly 800 years ago. He dreamed of a community of preachers who would pray and study together, and support each other in using their intellect and talents in proclaiming the good news of God’s truth and love wherever there were people in need of hearing it. Out of that tradition come creative voices for justice, sometimes in institutions for education or health care, movements advocating freedom or peace, or artists using poetry, color or dance to communicate pain and possibility.

Dominican missionary preachers tell of their experience of accompaniment and how they are transformed by it. By being present among the dispossessed, they discover in the midst of misery the power of God’s Spirit awakened in them, unleashing a passion that can only be described as the love of God. Like the disciples at Emmaus they say, “Were not our hearts burning within us...?” Jesus reveals to them a God who exercises justice with love, and expects us to do the same. This is what exercising justice means: We do this in memory of Him.

Bartolomé de Las Casas, O.P. (1484-1566), is remembered as Defender of the Indians, and for his great witness in challenging the conduct of the Spanish conquerors in the Americas. Though his own family and early priesthood had placed him on the side of the colonizers and slavery, he experienced a profound transformation when he witnessed the relentless cruelty inflicted on the indigenous. Once Las Casas recognized their human dignity and his own relationship to them as neighbor, he could no longer tolerate his complicity in this injustice. This led him to reject his former way of life, and to embrace a life of intense study and prayer. He became a Dominican in 1523, and a zealous advocate for the
voiceless. The courage Las Casas found for exercising justice came from his encounter with God in the word of the gospel and its indisputable message that all persons had a right to the same human respect. He found support in a community whose members shared their personal and pastoral struggles, and prayed together for the mercy of God. Las Casas became known for his tireless efforts on behalf of justice and freedom for all.

The JUST person is committed to living with integrity, to acting in such a way that inner convictions are observable in choices and behaviors. Christians called to justice by Jesus the Christ, have an enduring model for this way of living, which begins in communion with God. This is the model that Dominic used in exercising justice through preaching, and it is the model that Las Casas embraced after the encounter with God’s people that changed his life.

Promoting the nearness of the reign of God will be observable in right relationships among all. Social evil, systemic injustice, economic inequities cannot be ignored if the fullness of the gospel is to be proclaimed. Noticing those who are at the margins, who are neglected, excluded, silenced, or discarded, can be the beginning of moving toward them and standing with them.

None who preach and teach in the name of the gospel can ever be dispensed from facing the consequences of living in a world increasingly divided between privilege and misery. Bringing this awareness to the silence of prayer has the power to renew hearts. With the passion of God’s love and the vision of God’s eyes, the anguish of suffering is brought to consciousness. This kind of remembering and prayer feeds the imagination and fosters resilience for the challenge of exercising justice.

THE WORLD of the 21st century shares striking similarities to the 16th century world of Las Casas. Five hundred years after European Christianity claimed and colonized the peoples of Central and South America new waves of oppression and poverty are spreading. The pattern is the same. It begins with an absence of respect for human dignity, a lack of appreciation for difference, and leads to domination, exploitation and the erosion of indigenous cultures. International corporate interests are claiming ownership of natural resources, plant and animal life. International trade agreements benefit rich nations and take unfair advantage of workers and landowners, manipulating local politics and economics. Lawlessness, fueled by corruption and greed, contribute to a climate of chaos and fear. Denial of North American involvement is no longer possible. The symbols of corporate ownership and power are evident in the urban landscape as well as in remote rural settings.

The claim that justice has on Dominicans, or that Dominicans rightly claim as part of their charism, demands that their encounter with the word of God and the world of their experience come together, until they can no longer be separated and it is no longer possible to be silent. Exercising justice requires imagination and perseverance in the 21st century, just as it always has.
EXERCISING JUSTICE...behavior that recognizes the rights and responsibilities of all God's creation.

Our search for a more just world, in which the dignity of every human being will be respected, is not merely a moral imperative, but an expression of the Mystery of Love, which we are called to embody.

Timothy Radcliffe, O.P.
84th successor to St. Dominic

The Spirit, who is the source of all Christian wisdom, brings life out of death, and empowers hope, courage and resistance in the face of evil and injustice.

Mary Catherine Hilkert, O.P.
Dominican Theologian

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel or, in other words, of the church's mission.

"Justice in the World," 1971

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

We interact with others with integrity.
- How do we promote awareness and appreciation as the foundations of just behaviors?
- Which of our policies and practices foster universal respect for otherness?

We work to assure the rights of all people, especially women and children.
- How do we demonstrate an intentional resistance to the global spread of inequality?
- What efforts do we make to hear those who are voiceless in the structures of power?

We commit our energies to issues of poverty and racism.
- How do our actions promote life and offer hope to those who are vulnerable, poor and excluded?
- What unfair circumstances must we help to reverse?

We pay just salaries and provide just procedures to hear the concerns of those with whom we minister.
- How do we practice respect within our sphere of influence?
- What support must we seek to advance our mission and sustain the human resources required for it to continue?
Meeting the Charism
Again/For the First Time

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Additional resources for
Exercising Justice

• Gustavo Gutiérrez, Las Casas, Orbis.
• Mary Nona McGreal, O.P., ed., Dominicans at Home in
• John Orme Mills, O.P., ed., Justice, Peace and
• The Magazine, Edgewood College, “Dominican
• http://www.op.org
• http://un.op.org

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