Meeting the Charism Again/For the First Time
Dominican Values
Practicing Compassion

"Whatever God does, the first outburst is always compassion."
Meister Eckhart
DOMINIC, called the joyful friar by those who knew him in the 13th century, was also known for his tears and profound compassion. The mercy of justice and love was at the heart of the gospel he proclaimed. This same mercy is the word of hope people all over the globe long to hear today.

However Dominicans preach and teach—in classrooms, retreats, liturgies, on the internet, through journals, health care, arts, song and dance, as advocates for justice and peace, or in solidarity movements with those who struggle and suffer—they invite others to follow the gospel wherever it leads. Their confidence is deeply rooted in believing that the truth of the gospel is to be found in its teaching that God’s reign of justice and love will prevail. One result is that wherever projects are undertaken in the spirit of Dominic there are frequent reports of “outbursts of compassion.” These are welcomed as signs of the presence of God! The mission of bringing the light of gospel Truth into conversation with present reality is being passed on from generation to generation.

Practicing compassion in word or deed or relationship is a human expression of respect. It is an observable discipline because it brings a contemplative vision into action. Practicing compassion is evidence of a commitment to the future and a participation in the building of a holy and just society. Practicing compassion nurtures intention and strengthens solidarity. It also promises a journey into the mystery of God, revealed in the suffering of neighbors. Noticing, naming and being attentive can also be transforming, for it is likely that one will experience the gift of compassion in return, surely a sign of the mercy of God at work.

Compassion, love and solidarity characterized the lives of two Dominican saints of the early Americas. Martin de Porres (1579-1639) and Rose de Lima (1586-1617) lived in Peru when violence and corruption and turmoil were commonplace. Their land and their people had been claimed by European colonizers, and life was forever changed. The immediate effects included exploiting the indigenous Incas and importing and abusing African slaves, dismantling the social order and building an economy driven by greed.

THE EARLY lives of both Martin and Rose had been marked in different ways by the divisions of race and class, poverty and rejection. Healing for them had come through their encounters with Dominican communities. Inspired by the living memory of the compassion of Dominic and the courage of Catherine of Siena, their lives were transformed by a call to follow the gospel as Dominicans. Through the support and companionship of the common life they embraced, their faith in God and in themselves deepened, and they grew in their capacity to be creative, practical and direct in responding to the inequities that surrounded them. Indians and slaves as well as any who were denied the resources necessary for life and for health were the subjects of their compassion.
Across the centuries they continue to teach: Martin, of the sacredness and value of animal life, even beyond their use as tools, transportation, food or pets, and Rose of the resilience of the human spirit when it is touched by the goodness of God. The preaching of Martin and Rose was eloquent in its witness to humility and the power of love, and in this they were faithful to the gospel and to the tradition of preaching handed on to them.

**Earth** and many of its inhabitants today are suffering. The same patterns of domination and exploitation that drew tears from Dominic, Catherine, Martin and Rose, now threaten to colonize virtually all of the resources of the globe. Greed is the underlying motive for manipulating laws and social structures that grant privilege and security to some, leaving the vast majority in misery. Those who discover their own connection to this suffering, who learn to see all others as neighbors, understand how they are affected, and also know they have a responsibility to lead others in practicing compassion. Distance no longer limits knowing where oppression and injustice is felt, where ignorance and fear predominate, where beauty is obscured by neglect or violence, and human and non-human life is exploited.

There is an urgent need for teaching the skills of critical thinking and providing opportunities for practicing compassion. Educational, religious and civic leaders have the power to direct their economic and human resources to the principle that earth and its resources are for the benefit of all. The gospel vision is not ambiguous, and does not divide.

In the past cultural boundaries associated with ethnicity, religion and language have kept peoples separated, protecting their differences and shielding them from external critique and unwanted intrusion. This is no longer possible in an electronic world. Neither distance, time nor difference diminishes the speed with which borders are crossed, customs are challenged, distinctions are shattered and a way of life is forever changed. Through the movement inspired by Dominic God’s spirit is alive among people who strive to be present, offer companionship, listen with respect, overcome bias, speak the truth, challenge deceit, and restore human dignity.

The movement Dominic began in the 13th century finds expression in ways that could never have been imagined even a generation ago! His conviction that preachers and their preaching had to be useful to other people continues to allow the gift of his charism to be adapted freely and in new settings, so that it can meet the needs of those it seeks to serve. More than three centuries after the death of its founder, it was Dominic’s influence that created the path Martin de Porres and Rose de Lima followed in service of the Truth and the suffering people of Peru. Finding creative ways for practicing compassion today, the mission addresses the needs of our own suffering world. By giving witness to **veritas** and **caritas**, truth and love, hope is alive in the world and tears become expressions of gratitude.
There is no pain or sorrow which comes to us that has not first passed through the Heart of God.

Meister Eckhart

Never relax your desire to ask for my help.
Never lower your voice in crying out to me to be merciful to the world.
Never stop knocking at the door of my Truth by following in his footsteps.

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)
The Dialogue, 107

We remember that wherever Jesus went, people rediscovered their humanity and were filled with new riches, so they could give one another courage in their lives.

Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. (b. 1914)
Dominican Theologian

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

We recognize the intrinsic dignity and interdependence of all creation.
• How do we demonstrate compassion for the whole human family, and respect for earth and its inhabitants?
• What evidence of solidarity with the rest of the world do we provide?

We acknowledge local issues, sources of injustice and sorrow that make heavy burdens for people.
• How do we promote citizenship and the common good in the present as well as into the future?
• What principles can guide our efforts on behalf of justice and peace?

We support and cooperate with each person’s efforts to become his or her own best self.
• How do we support human dignity, human rights and freedom?
• What structures are necessary to welcome and honor both dialogue and differences of opinion?

We act in a manner consistent with the gospel of mercy we proclaim.
• How do we embody gospel virtues in our present reality?
• What are the signs of hope we offer by our visible presence?
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Additional resources for 
Practicing Compassion

• Alex García-Rivera, St. Martin de Porres, Orbis, 1995.
• www.op.org

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St. Martin de Porres © 1993 Robert Lenz
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