Meeting the Charism Again/For the First Time

Dominican Values

Promoting Partnership

"I could have made human beings in such a way that they all had everything, but I preferred to give different gifts to different people, so that they would all need each other."

Catherine of Siena, Dialogue, 7
PROMOTING partnership requires humility and courage; it also requires humility and courage! To challenge the conventional wisdom, reach beyond borders, even to consider the unfamiliar, means having to give and to receive. To understand the meaning of difference or the significance of another’s experience means letting go of certainty and trusting possibility. To do the hard work of building partnerships challenges the superficial and promotes the spiritual. To advocate the value of mutuality in building relationships is counter-cultural, and always has been. It is also essential in an age that is swiftly forming global alliances for the benefit of some, at the expense of vast others.

Promoting partnership can modify an existing balance of power. Seen through eyes of faith, it can also be an expression of the gospel: the justice and love of God, embodied in Jesus the Christ, seeks the unity of all creation, a unity that begins with partnership. Dialogue and cooperation, work and play, freedom and imagination will both nurture and replenish the emotional and spiritual energy needed to sustain it. Serious and sustained conversation can build understanding and trust when there is a deep communion with the source, the gift and the ongoing presence of God, the Source and Creator of unity.

Ordinarily the capacity an individual or group has for the hard work of forging relationships is limited by the circumstances of previous experience. Assumptions acquired over a lifetime of exposure to formative intellectual, spiritual and cultural traditions need to be examined. New conversation partners need to contribute their ideas, energy and resources to assure the success of mutual interests and common projects. Every member of every movement, institution and organization has to engage in new and mutually enhancing partnerships. For many this will require an expanded repertoire of skills.

THERE were enormous and contentious issues confronting church and society in the 14th century, just as there are in the 21st century. The vision and voice of Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) hold a place of honor in the Dominican tradition and in the history of the church and she is remembered as mystic, activist and Doctor of the Church. Catherine was passionate, prayerful, prophetic and persuasive in her untiring efforts on behalf of reconciliation in a world that was seriously divided. She demonstrated in her life both the difficulties of partnership as well as its rich possibilities.

The extraordinary public life Catherine undertook came only after her experience of living in seclusion for an extended period of time, where she had felt called to dwell in contemplative prayer, deepening her relationship with God. Her courage to speak, to write, to travel and to act came from the intimacy of that prayer. Though she might have chosen to enter a Dominican monastery, she chose instead to join the Dominican Mantellate, laywomen
dedicated to the life and mission of the Order. Catherine understood that she was to live among God’s people as an active contemplative, where she could demonstrate the compassionate love of God through her fierce love of others. Inspired by the preaching of the Dominicans the Mantellate had a ministry of service to the sick and the poor. Catherine embraced the demands of this active life, and grew in an unshakable conviction that human life was created in God’s image, and was to be lived as a true reflection of that image.

Catherine’s reputation as a peacemaker grew, allowing her unusual opportunities to proclaim the gospel of unity and peace to a church and world demoralized by power struggles and plague, division and death. The depth of her passion and her conviction attracted many followers, and came to the attention of leaders in both civic and religious circles. In spite of the fact that Catherine was a woman, held no formally designated position of authority and was not educated, her wisdom was respected and she was invited into unusual partnerships.

Her surviving correspondence with many of the powerful authority figures of her day demonstrates her directness, her clarity of thought, and the dramatic and persistent manner in which she noticed and named their failures, and challenged them to reform their lives for the sake of healing and peace. Always her message was the same: pray for God’s mercy and love to reconcile; be faithful to the gospel; respond with compassion to the cries of the suffering; and carry out your responsibilities with integrity.

Catherine’s passion for justice grew out of her prayer and her study; the wisdom of her public voice was nurtured in silence and a contemplative spirit. She found in the companionship of others who had embraced Dominic’s preaching mission, a way of life ideally suited to focusing attention on both the signs of God’s presence in the world as well as on the abuses of power that obscured them. As the credibility of leaders in the church erodes, and the gap widens between those on this planet who are privileged and those who are not, the witness of Catherine’s humility and courage is a symbol of hope to all who are tempted by discouragement.

The electronic world of communication and commerce has already established powerful links between nations and their economic, military and industrial interests. Ethnicity, politics, language and religion no longer function as boundaries, keeping people and nations apart. Opportunities for promoting partnership are abundant! Without them there is a real possibility that these cross-cultural and trans-cultural relationships will simply continue to accelerate the familiar patterns of political domination, economic exploitation, racial and ethnic discrimination and religious oppression. Those with the freedom and openness, humility and courage to promote partnership, will be those who have learned to see, to hear and to respect the other. The task is the same for all: to be intentional in promoting partnerships and a genuine connection with those who are other.
PROMOTING PARTNERSHIP ... a mutual relationship of mature persons who recognize their shared call to actions of justice and love.

“Our choice to link ourselves with others for the work of justice will lead us...to seek out those who may at first seem to be marching to different drummers from the ones we hear, in the hope we can find a common ground and merge our efforts....”

Mary Ellen Butcher, O.P. (1935-1992)

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

We foster a unity in mission that strengthens local leadership and enables the creative, innovative development of gifts for the sake of God’s people.

- How do we draw on the unique contributions of those with whom we work?
- What evidence of our commitment to the human family do we project to the wider community?

We practice participative decision-making.

- How do we assure that all voices necessary for any conversation are heard?
- What challenges must we attend to in balancing the responsibilities of leadership with a desire for inclusion?

We work with others as a sign of our desire for wholeness.

- How do we appropriately share responsibility while also maintaining integrity?
- What aspects of our reality do we need help with in order to build it up?

We respect difference and embrace diversity.

- How do we overcome resistance when encountering the unfamiliar?
- What priorities will help us honor this value?

“Catherine exercised her gift of wisdom not only in offering wise counsel, or asking the difficult question, but also in exhorting persons and groups in conflict – including those within the church – to listen to one another.”

Mary Catherine Hilkert, O.P.
Dominican Theologian

“Dominican spirituality is a matter of keeping partnership with the divine compassion.”

Erik Borgman
Dutch lay Dominican
Meeting the Charism
Again/For the First Time

Additional resources for
Promoting Partnership

- http://www.op.org

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

Project Coordinators
Barbara Dannhausen, O.P., Director
Ruth Poochigian, O.P., editor

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