

**Recovering the Contemplative Dimension**  
**General Chapter of the Dominican (July 12, 2001: Providence, RI)**

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At the moment of reception into the Order of Preachers, each one of us was asked the question: "What do you seek?", and we replied: "The mercy of God and your mercy". Finding myself here, this morning, at a General Chapter of the Order, about to speak to you on the subject of contemplation, I am conscious, as almost never before, of my own limitations, and of my great need, therefore, for my brothers' forbearance and compassion. I am still, God knows, a mere novice in the life of prayer and contemplation. And this talk is, I have no doubt, the most difficult I will ever be asked to give. So I ask you straight out, my brothers, to have compassion on me, and on my words, as I begin.

A great fidelity to the life of prayer and contemplation has been a distinguishing mark of many of our best-known Dominican preachers and saints. But, within the Church, at least until recently, the Order has generally been noted more for its intellectual prowess than for its contemplative zeal. Today, however, all that is beginning to change. There are now widely available, for example, more translations than ever before of the writings of people like Johannes Tauler, Catherine of Siena, Henry Suso, and Meister Eckhart. And St Thomas Aquinas, who was always revered as a dogmatic theologian within the Church, is now being regarded also, by many people, as a spiritual master.

So it would seem that, all of a sudden, we have an opportunity to allow the contemplative dimension of our tradition to speak with a profound and impressive authority to a new generation. But our own immediate task, and no doubt the reason for this talk this morning, is to allow that tradition to speak first of all to ourselves, here and now, and to allow it to address not only our hearts and our minds but also the way in which we live our lives as preachers.

Of course, all of us here are indebted to the witness of our own Dominican contemplative sisters. I know I am more indebted than I can say to the community of sisters at Siena Convent in Drogheda, Ireland. And some of you, if not all of you, will be aware that a full acknowledgment of the sisters' contemplative witness and support has already been given by Master Timothy in his most recent letter to the Order.

Not all forms of contemplation, it has to be said, have been affirmed by our Dominican forbears. In fact, in the *Vitae Fratrum*, there has survived a vivid account of one unfortunate friar, who very nearly lost his faith from too much "contemplation"! In similar vein, Humbert of Romans, in his long treatise on preaching, openly complains about those people whose "sole passion is for contemplation". These men seek out, he says, "a hidden life of quiet" or "a retired place for contemplation", and then refuse "to respond to the summons to be useful to others by preaching".

It is worth noting here, in passing, that the word "contemplation", in these early Dominican texts, does not possess the rather esoteric and high mystical character which it would later acquire in the sixteenth century. The word, it is true, can sometimes be linked with the notions of recollection and retirement, but it tends to have a much more plain and down-to-earth connotation. Often it can mean, in fact, little more than a simple act of attention or prayerful study. (In modern times, to add to the confusion, we tend to use the word "contemplation" as a basic synonym for prayer itself.)

Now obviously Humbert of Romans is not intending, in any way, to set up as contraries to one another the life of prayer and the life of preaching. "Since human effort can achieve nothing without the help of God", he writes, "the most important thing of all for a preacher is that he should have recourse to prayer". But the life of prayer and contemplation, which Humbert of Romans and the early Dominicans would recommend, the

contemplation which is the focus also of the present paper, is one which would compel us, in Humbert's fine phrase, to "come out into the open", compel us, that is, to set about the task of preaching.

To begin our reflections, I suggest we look first not to one of the most famous texts from our tradition, but to a text by an anonymous French Dominican of the thirteenth century. The passage in question I found hidden away in a large biblical commentary on The Book of Apoclypse which for centuries had been attributed to Aquinas. The work is now judged, however, to have been composed by a Dominican *équipe* working at St Jacques in Paris under the general supervision of the Dominican, Hugh of St Cher, between the years 1240 to 1244. Although a major part of the commentary makes for rather dull reading, certain passages in the work are composed with a clarity and force that remind one at times of the work of the modern French contemplative, Simone Weil. In one such passage our Dominican author notes that among the things "a man ought to see in contemplation", and ought "to write in the book of his heart", are "the needs of his neighbours":

He ought to see in contemplation what he would like to have done for himself, if he were in such need, and how great is the weakness of every human being...Understand from what you know about yourself the condition of your neighbour. ("Intellige ex te ipso quae sunt proximi tui.") And what you see in Christ and in the world and in your neighbour, write that in your heart.

These lines are memorable for the compassionate attention they give to the neighbour in the context of contemplation. But I would like to think as well that their emphasis on true self-knowledge, and their simple openness to Christ, to the neighbour, and to the world, strike a distinctly Dominican note. The passage ends with a simple but impressive reference to the task of preaching. We are exhorted by our author first of all to understand ourselves and be attentive to all that we see in the world around us and in our neighbour, and to reflect deep within our hearts on the things that we have observed. But then we are told to go out and preach: "First see, then write, then send...What is needed first is study, then reflection within the heart, and then preaching."

The remainder of my talk will be divided into three sections:

1. Contemplation: A Vision of Christ
2. Contemplation: A Vision of the World
3. Contemplation: A Vision of the Neighbour

Contemplation: A Vision of Christ

If you raise the subject of contemplation, for many people the first name that comes to mind is that of the Spanish Carmelite and mystic, St John of the Cross. But it is not the Carmelite John I want to talk about here. Instead, I would like to consider, for a moment, a much less known spiritual author, a man whose name, by coincidence, was exactly the same as that of the celebrated Juan de la Cruz. But this other John, this less known John of the Cross, this other spiritual author of the sixteenth century, was in fact a Dominican.

By the time Juan de la Cruz, the Dominican, published his major work, the *Diálogo*, in the middle of the sixteenth century, the life of prayer or contemplation had come to be regarded, in many parts of Europe, as a rather daunting and highly specialized activity. There was a real risk, therefore, that a whole generation of people might begin to lose contact with the robust simplicity of the Gospel, and might even cease to find encouragement in the teaching of Christ himself concerning prayer. What I find impressive about the work of Juan de la Cruz, the Dominican, is the way he exposed, as exaggerated, the emphasis in that period on the need for special interior experiences, and the way also in which he defended simple vocal prayer, and underlined the importance, in spiritual transformation, of the ordinary, everyday struggle, on the part of the Christian, to live a life of virtue.

In his *Diálogo*, Juan de la Cruz was clearly determined to challenge those among his contemporaries who, in their writings, tended to exalt prayer almost beyond human reach, and who spoke of contemplation in a

decidedly elitist and exclusive spirit. Accordingly, with the salt of the Gospel in his words - and with a kind of sharp humour - the Dominican asserted: "If indeed only contemplatives, in the strict sense of the word, can attain to heaven, then, as for myself, I would have to say what the Emperor Constantine replied to Bishop Acesius, who had shown himself to be extremely rigid at the Council of Nicea: 'Take your ladder, and climb up to heaven by your own means if you're able' because the rest of us - we're nothing but sinners"!

This sharp and vivid reply reminds me of a no less vivid and also amusing comment made by an elderly Dominican of this Province of St Joseph. He was affectionately known, I understand, as Father "Buzz". He came from Memphis, Tennessee. On one occasion, not feeling very well, he went to visit his doctor, who said to him: "I'm afraid, Father, the best thing you can do now is to give up drinking alcohol completely". To which the Dominican replied: "Doctor, I'm not worthy of the best. What's the second best?"

Behind the invective or sharp humour of the Dominican, Juan de la Cruz, there is an important statement being made. And it is this: prayer or contemplation is not something that can be achieved by mere human effort, however well-intentioned or however strenuous. Prayer is a grace. It is a gift that lifts us beyond anything we ourselves could ever attain by ascetic practice or by meditative technique. Accordingly, communion with God, actual friendship with God in prayer, although impossible even for the strong, is something God himself can achieve for us in a second, if he wishes. "Sometimes", a thirteenth century Dominican homily makes bold to declare, "a man is in a state of damnation before he begins his prayer, and before he is finished he is in a state of salvation"!

The preacher of this homily, William Peraldus, in answer to the question "why everyone ought to be glad to learn how to pray", says something which we almost never hear stated three centuries later. For, by that time, as I have already indicated, prayer in its most authentic form, was generally thought to be something very difficult to achieve. But Peraldus the Dominican states, without the least hesitation or self-consciousness: "prayer is such an easy job"!

This statement may, perhaps, sound naïve. But it draws its authority, I believe, from the Gospel itself. For, is it not the case that, in the Gospel, we are encouraged by Christ to pray with great simplicity of heart and straightforwardness? When, over the years, Dominicans have found themselves confronted with detailed methods and techniques of meditation, and with long lists of instructions of what to do in meditation, and what not to do, their reaction has almost always been the same: they instinctively feel that something has gone wrong.

The reaction of Bede Jarrett, for example, is typical. In one place he notes, with real regret, how on occasion prayer can become "reduced to hard and fast rules", and can be so "mapped-out and regimented" that "it hardly seems at all to be the language of the heart". When this happens, in the memorable words of Jarrett, "All adventure has gone, all the personal touches, and all the contemplation. We are too worried and harassed to think of God. The instructions are so detailed and insistent that we forget what we are trying to learn. As a consequence, we get bored and so no doubt does God."

St Teresa of Avila, writing on one occasion on the subject of prayer, makes quite a remarkable confession. She says that "some books on the subject of prayer" that she was reading, encouraged her to set aside, as a positive hindrance, "the thought of Christ's humanity". Teresa tried to follow this path for a while, but she soon realized that a prayer-life which excluded Christ was at least as much mistaken as it was mystical! I mention these facts here, because it is instructive to note the reaction of another Dominican of the sixteenth century, the down-to-earth Thomist, Francisco de Vitoria, to this sort of abstract mysticism. Vitoria writes:

There is a new kind of contemplation, which is practiced by the monks these days, consisting of meditating on God and the angels. They spend a long time in a state of elevation, thinking nothing. This is, no doubt, very

good, but I do not find much about it in scripture, and it is, honestly, not what the saints recommend. Genuine contemplation is reading the bible and the study of true wisdom.

That last statement from Vitoria betrays, if I am not mistaken, the direct influence of St Dominic. Dominic, as you know well, never composed for his brethren any kind of devotional or spiritual text or testament. He was a preacher first and last, not a writer. And yet, even at this distance in time, there are available to us within the tradition a surprising number of details concerning his way of prayer and contemplation. One reason for this is Dominic's own extraordinary temperament. He possessed an exuberance of nature that, far from being suppressed by the life of prayer and contemplation, seems in fact to have been wonderfully awakened and released. He was a man, as Cardinal Villot once remarked, "stupefyingly free". At prayer in particular he could hardly, it seems, contain himself. Often he would cry out to God at the top of his voice. As a result, even his private prayer was a kind of open book to his brethren. At night, when he was alone in the church, his voice would often be heard echoing throughout the entire convent.

So Dominic prays with all that he is - body and soul. He prays privately with intense and humble devotion. And, with that same deep faith and profound emotion, he prays in public the prayer of the Mass. Although the intensity of Dominic's faith and feeling may be unusual, as well as the extraordinary length of his night vigils, for the rest his prayer seems indistinguishable from that of any ordinary devout Christian man or woman. His prayer is never in any way esoteric. It is always simple, always ecclesial.

One of the great merits, in my view, of the Dominican contemplative tradition is its dogged resistance to the esoteric aura or spiritual glamour that tends to surround the subject of contemplation. The well-known preacher in the English province, the Northern Irishman Vincent McNabb, for example, with characteristic good humour, liked now and again to bring the subject of contemplation back down from the high clouds of mysticism to the plain earth of Gospel truth. Concerning the question of prayer, for example, as presented in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, McNabb writes:

The Publican did not know he was justified. If you had asked him, "Can you pray?" he would have said, "No, I cannot pray. I was thinking of asking the Pharisee. He seems to know all about it. I could only say I was a sinner. My past is so dreadful. I cannot imagine myself praying. I am better at stealing."

In *The Nine Ways of Prayer*, we are afforded a glimpse of St Dominic himself repeating the Publican's prayer while lying down prostrate on the ground before God. "His heart", we are told, "would be pricked with compunction, and he would blush at himself and say, sometimes loudly enough for it actually to be heard, the words from the Gospel, 'Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner'."

Without exception I find that, in the prayer-lives of the Dominican preachers I most admire, there is always something of that common neediness, and that Gospel simplicity. When at prayer, these preachers are not afraid to speak to God directly, as to a friend. But always they return instinctively to the straightforward Gospel prayer of petition. Here is Aquinas, for example:

I come before you as a sinner, O God, Source of all mercy. I am unclean, I beseech you to cleanse me. O Sun of Justice, give sight to a blind man...O King of Kings, clothe one who is destitute.

Almighty, everlasting God you see that I am coming to the sacrament of your only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. I come to it as a sick man to the life-giving healer, as one unclean to the source of mercy...as one who is poor and destitute to the Lord of heaven and earth.

The words of this prayer are prayed in deep poverty of spirit. But the prayer is said with utter confidence all the same. And why? Because the words of the prayer are Gospel words, and because Christ, the life-giving healer and source of mercy, is at its center.

## Contemplation: A Vision of the World

In some religious traditions, the contemplative life implied an almost complete turning away from the world, and in the case of certain ascetic religious, of a rejection not only of their immediate family and friends, but also of people in general, or at least those who appeared to be dominated by weakness or by worldly passion. Fortunately, however, the impulse towards contemplation in the lives of our best-known Dominican preachers and saints, was never characterized by that sort of rigid, judgmental attitude.

A good example, I think, of the Dominican approach, is that short statement already quoted above by the anonymous Dominican friar writing at St Jacques in Paris in the thirteenth century: "Among the things a man ought to see in contemplation", he wrote, "are the needs of his neighbours", and also "how great is the weakness of every human being". So the authentic contemplative in our tradition, the authentic apostle, does not call down curses on the sinful world. But, instead, conscious of his or her own weakness, and humbly identified, therefore, with the world's need, the Dominican calls down a blessing.

In an unusually striking moment in *The Dialogue of St Catherine of Siena*, the saint is asked by God the Father to lift up her eyes to him so that he might demonstrate, in some way, the extent of his passionate care for the whole world. "Look at my hand", the Father says to her. When Catherine does this, she sees at once - and the vision must have astonished her - the entire world being somehow held up and enclosed in God's hand. Then, the Father says to her: "My daughter, see now and know that no-one can be taken away from me... They are mine. I created them and I love them ineffably. And so, in spite of their wickedness, I will be merciful to them... and I will grant what you have asked me with such love and sorrow".

What is immediately obvious from this account is that Catherine's passionate devotion to the world does not spring simply from the instinct of a generous heart. No - it is something grounded also in a profound theological vision and understanding. And this fact holds true for other Dominicans as well. The vision of Thomas Aquinas, for example, has been characterized by the German Thomist, Josef Pieper, as nothing less than a theologically-founded "worldliness"! This statement may at first surprise us. But, properly understood, a similar assertion can, I think, be made, not only about Catherine's vision, but also about the vision of Dominic himself.

My favourite image of St Dominic, is one painted on wood, which can be seen in Bologna. It records "the miracle of bread", which, according to tradition, took place at the convent of Santa Maria alla Mascarella. In this medieval work, Dominic's contemplative identity is indicated by the black capuce over his head. But the man we see before us is, first and last, "vir evangelicus", a man "in persona Christi", surrounded by his brethren, and seated at a table, a meal, which as well as recalling "the miracle of bread", at once suggests a communal and liturgical life, a real eucharistic fellowship. His look is one of extraordinary candour. And his physical presence gives the impression of a man of robust simplicity, a man entirely at ease with himself and with the world around him. In all of medieval iconography, I can think of no other religious painting or fresco in which a saint is shown, as here, looking out at the world with such serene confidence and ease of spirit.

One small detail worth noting is the way Dominic's right hand takes hold of the bread so decisively, while his left hand, no less firm and strong, holds on to the table. The Dominic of this painting, like the Dominic of history, clearly possesses a very firm and very vital hold on the immediate world around him.

That sense of openness to the world, is a marked characteristic of many of the great Dominican preachers. "When I became a Christian", noted Lacordaire, "I did not lose sight of the world". And, in similar vein, in the century just past, Vincent McNabb remarked once to some of his brethren: "The world is waiting for those who love it... If you don't love men don't preach to them - preach to yourself"!

On one occasion, deliberately taking to task those contemplatives, some of them monks and priests, whose passion for the Absolute tended to make them indifferent to the world, and to "the true inwardness of things", to the fact that "things exist in themselves, with their own proper nature and needs", Yves Congar sought to

highlight what he considered to be an important, if unexpected, lay quality in the Dominican vision of Aquinas. In Congar's opinion, someone who is "authentically lay", such as Aquinas, is "one for whom, through the very work which God has entrusted to him, the substance of things in themselves is real and interesting." Congar strikes a similar note, in a letter written to a fellow Dominican in 1959. Expressing a certain disinterest in what he referred to as "the distinction 'contemplative/active life'", Congar wrote:

If my God is the God of the Bible, the living God, the "I am, I was, I am coming", then God is inseparable from the world and from human beings...My action, then, consists in handing myself over to my God, who allows me to be the link for his divine activity regarding the world and other people. My relationship to God is not that of a cultic act, which rises up from me to Him, but rather that of a faith by which I hand myself over to the action of the living God, communicating himself according to his plan, to the world and to other human beings. I can only place myself faithfully before God, and offer the fulness of my being and my resources so that I can be there where God awaits me, the link between this action of God and the world.

Reading this extract from Congar's letter I am immediately reminded of one of the most remarkable visions of St Catherine of Siena. In it, St Dominic appears precisely as a kind of "link" between God's action and the world. Catherine reported to her Dominican friend, Father Bartolomeo, that first of all she saw the Son of God coming forth from the mouth of the Eternal Father. And, then, to her amazement, she saw, emerging from the Father's breast, "the most blessed Patriarch Dominic". In order to "dispel her amazement" the Father then said to her: "Just as this Son of mine, by nature...spoke out before the world...so too Dominic, my son by adoption." The union between Dominic and the Father, in this vision, could hardly be more intimate. But the preacher is not seen here, in the usual mode of the contemplative, turning away from the world towards God. Rather, with the Son of God, Dominic is seen coming out from the One who, from the very beginning, "so loved the world".

In Congar's terms, Dominic's only action has been to surrender himself, with faith and hope, to the great, saving initiative of God. "There is only one thing that is real", Congar writes, "one thing that is true: to hand oneself over to God!" But Congar is also well aware that, in the life of Dominic and the early friars, this handing over of self, was never simply an individual act of will. It was always a surrender that involved, on the part of the brethren, a daily "following in the footsteps of their Saviour" - a radical and free acceptance, therefore, of an evangelical way of life.

It is here, at this point, that we meet head on, as it were, some of the most obvious and most concrete forms of the contemplative dimension of our life: choir in common, for example, study, regular observance, the following of the Rule of St Augustine, and the discipline of silence. These particular religious exercises and practices, represented for St Dominic a vital part of the evangelical way of life. But preaching remained paramount always. We can, I think, be grateful that, in recent decades, this message concerning preaching has come home to the Order loud and clear.

But what of the forms of regular and contemplative life which, ideally, should give support to preaching? Are we not, perhaps, today in need of recovering faith in this aspect of our tradition? Certainly we are not monks; but neither are we a secular institute. Preaching is in itself, of course, a spiritual activity, even a contemplative one. But, for St Dominic and the early friars, speaking about God "de Deo" - the grace of preaching - presupposes first speaking with God - "cum Deo" - the grace of actual prayer or contemplation. In the apostolic life, adopted by the friars, the ecstasy of service or attention to the neighbour, is unthinkable without the ecstasy of prayer or attention to God, and vice versa.

Obviously, in order to become a preacher, one does not have to be a monk of the desert, or a master of mysticism, or even a saint. But one does have to become, in Humbert of Roman's phrase, at least "a pray-er first". One does have somehow to surrender oneself to God, in prayer, with at least the humble ecstasy of hope. "For", as St Catherine of Siena reminds us in *The Dialogue*, "one cannot share what one does not have in oneself."

In the end, of course, what matters, is preaching. Christ did not say to us: "Be still and contemplate". He commanded us to "go out and preach". Nevertheless, it is worth remembering here that, for the early friars, the grace of preaching, the surrender to God's living Word, was always intimately linked with a communal life of prayer and adoration, and with what Jordan of Saxony calls, in a fine phrase, "apostolic observance".

The pattern of Dominican community life and community prayer was, in Jordan's understanding, not some sort of external or arbitrary discipline. Rather, Jordan saw it with enthusiasm as an opportunity for us to experience, here and now in faith, Christ risen among us. In a letter which he wrote to the brethren in Paris, Jordan speaks of the need for each one of us to hold fast to the bond of charity, and keep faith with the brethren. If we should fail to do this, Jordan says, we risk an opportunity really to meet the risen Christ. For "the man " who cuts himself off from the unity of the brotherhood, "may from time to time feel some very slight and fugitive consolation of the spirit." But, in the opinion of Jordan, "he can never fully have sight of the Lord unless he is with the disciples gathered in the house."

In the practice of prayer, both public and private, and in the task of preaching, we discover, in *medio ecclesiae*, that Christ is now living his life within us. He is our risen brother to whom we can turn, and speak as with a friend. "Consider", St Thomas writes, quoting Chrysostom, "what a joy is granted you, what a glory is given you, to talk with God in your prayers, to converse with Christ, asking for whatever you want, whatever you desire."

In contemplation, we turn our whole attention to God. But there is something else as well. God's Word, though utterly transcendent in its source, has come down into the world, and has taken flesh. "God", as Simone Weil once remarked, has to be on the side of the subject." The initiative is always his. Accordingly, both in our work and in our prayer, we come to realize that Christ is not just the object of our regard. He is the Word alive within us, the friend "in whom we live and move and have our being". And thus, we can make bold to say, echoing the First Letter of St John: This is contemplation - this is contemplative love - not so much that we contemplate God, but that God has first contemplated us, and that now in us, in some sense, and even through us, as part of the mystery of his risen life in the Church, he contemplates the world.

More than fifty years ago, the French existentialist philosopher, Albert Camus, was invited to give a talk to a Dominican community in France at Latour-Maubourg. In his address, Camus strongly encouraged the brethren to maintain their own Dominican and Christian identity. "Dialogue is only possible", he remarked, "between people who remain what they are, and who speak the truth." Remain what you are. It sounds like something fairly straightforward. But, as we know well, our identity as Dominicans, with its fundamental evangelical simplicity, on the one hand, and its great richness and variety of elements, on the other, is something that can never be taken for granted. In any given age, there is always the risk that some aspect of our identity will be lost or forgotten or ignored. And, as a result, the task of preaching - the main purpose of the Order - will suffer.

If there is one aspect or dimension of our life as Dominicans which, in this age, is vulnerable to neglect, it is - I have no doubt - the contemplative dimension. At the beginning of this talk, I recalled the story of an early Dominican who almost lost his faith through too much contemplation. Now I very much doubt if that would happen today in the Order. If anything, we are more likely, in this fast-speed, high-tech world, to lose our faith through too much activity!

In this context, I find encouraging and challenging a comment made in a late interview by Marie-Dominique Chenu. Living at Saint Jacques in Paris, in the same convent as the *frater anonymus* from the thirteenth century whom I quoted earlier, Chenu discovered that what he saw in the world somehow prompted him to contemplation. The world and the Word of God should not, Chenu insisted, be separated. "Our priority is to go out to the world. The world is the place where the Word of God takes on meaning." These statements I think we understand today. They are part of our received inheritance since the twentieth century, and indeed since the thirteenth. But the comment from Chenu which I find most interesting, concerns his own initial experience of the Order, and the reason why he joined. "I had no intention of entering", he tells us, "but I was impressed by

the atmosphere of the place." It was not, strictly speaking, a monastic atmosphere, Chenu recalls, but one of contemplation all the same. And it was "the contemplative atmosphere" that drew him. Not only that - the brothers' devotion to study, and the general air of intense and ascetic dedication, remained with Chenu for many years. "All through my life", he said, "I have reaped the benefits of that contemplative cadre."

The contemplative life itself, of course, receives attention from Aquinas in the Summa. You remember I spoke, earlier in this section, of the "lay spirit" in Aquinas - how he looked at the things of this world with respect. But, in the Summa, when he discusses the contemplative life, Aquinas emphasizes the importance of giving attention also to what he calls "eternal things". He writes: "The contemplative life consists in a certain liberty of spirit. Thus Gregory says that the contemplative life produces a certain freedom of mind, because it considers eternal things."

That "freedom of mind", which comes from contemplation, is not something reserved only for enclosed contemplatives. As preachers, in fact, we need that freedom more perhaps than anyone. For, without it, we risk becoming prisoners of the spirit of the age, and of the fashions of the age. And what we preach, in the end, will not be the Word of God, but instead some word or some ideology of our own. And that word, that message, will be of little use to the world, even if we seem to be carrying it to the furthest frontiers of human need. For really to "come out into the open", we ourselves require, first of all, as the Gospel and our own tradition remind us, to make a journey within. "God", Eckhart says: "is in, we are out. God is at home, we are abroad... 'God leads the just through narrow paths to the highway that they may come out into the open'."

### **Contemplation: A Vision of the Neighbour**

In traditional religious literature, the word "ecstasy" is often linked with that of contemplation. But, nowadays, on the street, the word means, of course, one thing and one thing only: a very potent and very dangerous drug! Over the centuries, Dominicans have not been shy to use the word on occasion when talking about prayer or contemplation. But the following rather sharp and challenging comment from Eckhart on the subject, is typical. He says: "If a man were in an ecstasy, as St Paul was, and knew that some sick man needed him to give him a bit of soup, I should think it far better if you would abandon your ecstasy out of love and show greater love in caring for the other in his need." "Love" - there it is, that small Gospel word, that harbinger of the grace of attention, that reminder to all of us of what contemplation - Christian contemplation - really means!

One of the statements about St Dominic most often quoted is that "he gave the day to his neighbours, and the night to God". It is a telling statement, but in a way not strictly true. For, even after the day was over, in the great silence and solitude of Dominic's long night vigils, the neighbour was not forgotten. According to one of the saint's contemporaries - Brother John of Bologna - Dominic, after lengthy prayers, lying face down on the pavement of the Church, would rise up, and perform two simple acts of homage. First, within the Church, he would "visit each altar in turn...until midnight". But then "he would go very quietly and visit the sleeping brethren; and, if necessary, he would cover them up."

The way this account has been written down, one has the sense that Dominic's reverence for the individual altars in the Church, is somehow intimately related to his reverence and care for the sleeping brethren. It is almost as if Dominic is acknowledging, first of all, the presence of the sacred in the altars, and then - with no less reverence - acknowledging that same presence in his own brethren. I have always been struck by a phrase which Yves Congar quoted many years ago from Nicolas Cabasilas. It reads: "Among all visible creatures, human nature alone can truly be an altar." Congar himself, in his book, *The Mystery of the Temple*, makes bold to say: "Every Christian is entitled to the name of 'saint' and the title of 'temple'." And again, echoing that same Pauline vision, the first Master after Dominic, Jordan of Saxony, writing to a Dominican community of nuns, exclaimed: "The temple of God is holy, and you are that temple; nor is there any doubt but that the Lord is in his holy temple, dwelling within you."

Among all those, within the Dominican tradition, who have spoken and written concerning the neighbour in contemplation, the most outstanding in my view is St Catherine of Siena. On the very first page of her Dialogue, we are told that "when she was at prayer, lifted high in spirit", God revealed to her something of the mystery and dignity of every human being. "Open your mind's eye", he said to her, "and you will see the dignity and beauty of my reasoning creature." Catherine obeys at once. But when she opens the eye of her mind in prayer, she discovers not only a vision of God, and a vision of herself in God as his image, but also a new and compassionate vision and understanding of her neighbour. "[S]he immediately feels compelled", Catherine writes, "to love her neighbour as herself for she sees how supremely she herself is loved by God, beholding herself in the wellspring of the sea of the divine essence."

Contained in these few words of Catherine there is, I believe, a profound yet simple truth: the source of her vision of the neighbour and the cause of her deep respect for the individual person, is her contemplative experience. What Catherine receives in prayer and contemplation is what Dominic had received before her - not simply the command from God to love her neighbour as she had been loved, but an unforgettable insight beyond or beneath the symptoms of human distress, a glimpse into the hidden grace and dignity of each person. So deeply affected was Catherine by this vision of the neighbour that she remarked on one occasion to Raymond of Capua that if he could only see this beauty - the inner, hidden beauty - of the individual person as she saw it, he would be willing to suffer and die for it. "Oh Father...if you were to see the beauty of the human soul, I am convinced that you would willingly suffer death a hundred times, were it possible, in order to bring a single soul to salvation. Nothing in this world of sense around us can possibly compare in loveliness with a human soul".

The assertion of a willingness to die a hundred times for the sake of the neighbour, sounds extreme. But it is typical of Catherine. In another place, Catherine writes: "Here I am, poor wretch, living in my body, yet in desire constantly outside my body! Ah, good gentle Jesus! I am dying and cannot die." That last phrase, "I am dying and cannot die" Catherine repeats a number of times in her letters. Two centuries later, the Carmelite mystic, St Teresa of Avila, also uses the same phrase, but uses it in a very different way from Catherine. True to her Carmelite vocation, Teresa's whole attention is fixed, with deep longing, on Christ her Spouse. Without him, the world holds little or no interest. And so, in one of her poems, Teresa tells us that she is "dying" of great spiritual pain - because she cannot "die" physically as yet, and be one with Christ in heaven:

Straining to leave this life of woe,  
With anguish sharp and deep I cry:  
"I die because I do not die."

When Catherine uses the phrase, "I die because I cannot die", she never uses it to express a desire to be out of this world. Of course, like Teresa, Catherine longs to be with Christ. But her passion for Christ compels her, as a Dominican, to want to serve the Body of Christ, the Church, here and now in the world, and in any way she can. Her anguish of longing comes from her awareness that all her efforts are inevitably limited. She writes: "I am dying and cannot die; I am bursting and cannot burst because of my desire for the renewal of holy Church, for God's honour, and for everyone's salvation".

The mysticism of Catherine of Siena, like that of Dominic, is an ecclesial mysticism. It is a mysticism of service not a mysticism of psychological enthusiasm. God is, of course, for both Catherine and Dominic, always the primary focus of attention, but the neighbour, and the neighbour's need, are never forgotten. When, on one occasion, a group of hermits refused to abandon their solitary life in the woods, even though their presence was badly needed by the Church in Rome, Catherine wrote at once to them with biting sarcasm: "Now really, the spiritual life is quite too lightly held if it is lost by change of place. Apparently, God is an acceptor of places, and is found only in a wood, and not elsewhere in time of need!"

This outburst from Catherine does not mean that she had no appreciation for the ordinary aids and supports necessary for the contemplative life: solitude, for example, and recollection, and silence. Silence in particular

Catherine respected. But what she did not approve of at all was the cowardly silence of certain ministers of the Gospel who, in her opinion, ought to have been crying out loud and clear on behalf of truth and justice. "Cry out as if you had a million voices", she urged, "It is silence which kills the world".

Two centuries later, in a letter sent home to Spain by the Dominican preacher, Bartolomé de Las Casas, we hear the same note of urgency. The year was 1545. Already, with no small courage, Bartolomé had discerned that his vocation was to become a voice for those who had no voice. Being confronted daily by the appalling degradation and torture of innocent people all around him, he was determined to keep silent no longer. "I believe", he wrote, "God wants me to fill heaven and earth, and the whole earth anew, with cries, tears and groans."

Las Casas did not base the strength of his challenge on mere emotion. Again and again we find the Dominican preacher appealing in his writings to what he called the "intelligence of the faith". According to Las Casas, the best way to arrive at Gospel truth was "by commending oneself earnestly to God, and by piercing very deeply - until one finds the foundations." It was at this level of humble yet persistent meditation that Bartolomé encountered not just the truth about God, but God himself, the God of the Bible, the Father of Christ Jesus, the living God who, in Bartolomé's own words, has "a very fresh and living memory of the smallest and most forgotten."

By allowing himself to be exposed in this way to the face of Christ crucified in the afflicted, Bartolomé was a true son of his father, Dominic. For Dominic was a man possessed not only by a vision of God, but also by a profound inner conviction of people's need. And it was to the men and women of his own time, to his own contemporaries, whose need he received almost like a wound in prayer, it was to them Dominic was concerned to communicate all that he had learned in contemplation.

At the very core of St Dominic's life, there was a profound contemplative love of God - that first and last. But reading through the very early accounts of Dominic's prayer-life, what also immediately impresses, is the place that is accorded to others - to the afflicted and oppressed - within the act of contemplation itself. The "alii" - the others - are not simply the passive recipients of Dominic's graced preaching. Even before the actual moment of preaching, when St Dominic becomes a kind of channel of grace, these people - the afflicted and oppressed - inhabit "the inmost shrine of his compassion". They form part even of the "contemplata" in contemplata aliis tradere. Jordan of Saxony writes:

God had given [Dominic] a special grace to weep for sinners and for the afflicted and oppressed; he bore their distress in the inmost shrine of his compassion, and the warm sympathy he felt for them in his heart spilled over in the tears which flowed from his eyes.

In part, of course, this means simply that when he prays Dominic remembers to intercede for those people he knows to be in need, and for sinners especially. But there is something more - some "special grace" to use Jordan's phrase. The wound of knowledge that opens up Dominic's mind and heart in contemplation, allowing him with an awesome unprotectedness to experience his neighbour's pain and his neighbour's need, cannot be accounted for simply by certain crowding memories of pain observed or by his own natural sympathy. The apostolic wound Dominic receives, which enables him to act and to preach, is a contemplative wound.

## **Conclusion**

I remember, as a novice in the Order, putting a question about contemplation to one of the priests in the house, a wonderful man called Cahal Hutchinson. "What", I asked, "is the secret of Dominican contemplation?" Father Cahal hesitated a moment. He smiled at me. Then he said: "Brother Paul, never tell the Carmelites or the Jesuits, but we have no secret other than the Gospel secret!" "However", he went on, "as a Dominican, I can reveal to you the two great laws of contemplation." Immediately, with a novice enthusiasm, I took out my pen

and paper. Cahal said: "The first law is - pray. And the second law is - keep at it!" Perhaps, my brothers, that's the first and the final word to be said on the subject.

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<http://www.op.org/international/english/Documents/Articles/murray1.htm>