

Praise for *Preachers at Prayer*

“*Preachers at Prayer* is a book that helps the reader understand more deeply what is stated so powerfully in John 1:18: *Only the one who comes from the breast of the Father can make him known.* This book is a must-read for all the members of the Dominican family and for all those who desire to share the warmth of God’s love that they know and feel in their hearts.”

—**Gerard Timoner, OP**, Master of the Order of Preachers, from the foreword

“*Preachers at Prayer* is a moving invitation to every preacher. Fr. Murray shows that it is in quiet prayer that preachers find—or rather, are given—these essential elements that light fire both in their hearts and in the hearts of hearers: spiritual depth, from preachers who have surrendered themselves to the Gospel of Christ; delight in God and in God’s beloved; wisdom and integrity, fruits of the cross of Christ in which preachers lovingly share; compassion for God’s people, which shines not only in words spoken but first and foremost in lived, visible witness; and hope—the piercing conviction that God is ever-faithful, and that his Word, Jesus, is himself the fullness of truth. Fr. Murray offers every preacher profound insight from the great teachers of the Dominican spiritual tradition and thus invites us to lean deeply, in love and surrender, into the side of Christ and into the heart of the Church. A striking quotation from Bl. Humbert of Romans will stay with me as a permanent, stirring challenge: ‘If preaching fails, there is spiritual famine.’”

—**Archbishop J. Peter Sartain**, Archbishop Emeritus of Seattle

“This much-needed book by revered spiritual master Paul Murray, OP, responds to a concern of Pope Francis that people ‘suffer because of homilies.’ With erudition and eloquence, Fr. Murray encourages preachers to harness the ‘intelligence of the faith’ so that, in preaching, they can devote closer attention to the ‘void or gap in our lives,’ ‘that ache for God familiar to us all, our heart’s wound of longing.’ Preaching is to be focused ‘on the drama of divine mercy’; it must pass on ‘a personal and living experience of the mystery’ (Pope St. John Paul II) and ‘awaken new desire for God and new hope.’ For ‘if preaching fails, there is spiritual famine’ (Bl. Humbert of Romans). This book provides nourishment that leads to a feast.”

—**Peter John Cameron, OP**, Carl J. Peter Chair of Homiletics,
Pontifical North American College, Rome

Preachers at Prayer is a rare gift. Although it is a collection of Paul Murray’s addresses to Dominicans, it allows the rest of us who must also proclaim the Gospel to eavesdrop and so learn vital lessons about prayer, about study, and about that darkness that is caused not by obscurity but by the radiance of God’s presence. Learning these lessons will change us. This rare gift is for everyone.”

—**Msgr. Roderick Strange**, Professor of Theology at St. Mary’s
University, Twickenham (England), author of *Journey into Light*

PREACHERS
at PRAYER

PREACHERS
at PRAYER
Soundings in the Dominican Spiritual Tradition

PAUL MURRAY, OP
FOREWORD BY GERARD TIMONER, OP

WORD  on FIRE_®

Published by Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007

© 2024 by Paul Murray

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved

Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction by Cassie Bielak

Cover image: *The Nine Ways of Prayer of Saint Dominic*,
Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ross. 3 (f. 9r)

Scripture excerpts are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible:
Catholic Edition (copyright © 1989, 1993), used by permission of the
National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.
All rights reserved worldwide.

Chapter 1, “Prayer into Preaching: Recovering the Contemplative Dimension,”
given originally as a talk to the General Chapter of the Dominican Order
(Providence, RI, July 2001). This talk was published as a small book by
Dominican Publications, Dublin, in 2003 (<https://dominicanpublications.com/>). Chapter 2, “What Makes for Good Preaching?” given originally as a talk
to the International Colloquium on *Dei Verbum* (Angelicum, Rome, February
27, 2016). This talk, with its original title, “Preaching Today,” was published in
Angelicum 93, no. 3 (2016): 585–598. Chapter 3, “Dominican Wisdom and the
Dark Night,” given originally as an Aquinas Lecture, Dominican University
(River Forest, IL, February 28, 2008). Chapter 4, “Dominicans and the Key of
Knowledge,” given originally as a talk for Dominican friars studying in Rome
on a day of retreat held at the Angelicum (February 19, 2023).

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner
whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations
in critical articles or reviews. For more information, contact Word on Fire
Catholic Ministries, PO Box 97330, Washington, DC 20090-7330
or email contact@wordonfire.org.

ISBN: 978-1-68578-095-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023951023

Dedicated
to Philip McShane, OP

Contents

FOREWORD

Gerard Timoner, OP
Master of the Order of Preachers

xi

INTRODUCTION

xiii

CHAPTER ONE

Prayer into Preaching:
Recovering the Contemplative Dimension

I

CHAPTER TWO

What Makes for Good Preaching?

29

CHAPTER THREE

Dominican Wisdom and the Dark Night

44

CHAPTER FOUR

Dominicans and the Key of Knowledge:
A Talk to Friars Studying in Rome

77

Foreword

Gerard Timoner, OP
Master of the Order of Preachers

Preachers at Prayer is a book addressed to “attentive seekers of truth, men and women of prayer, readers interested in learning more about the Dominican spiritual tradition.” Brother Paul Murray, esteemed and beloved professor at the Angelicum and former spiritual director of the Convitto Internazionale San Tommaso, shares with a wider audience the gathered fruits of his contemplation—a collection of talks he gave over several years right up to the present, all of them delivered in *loving obedience* to his confreres and students who requested him to speak on the different themes that make up the chapters of the present work. Echoing the prophet Ezekiel, Paul wisely calls our attention to the “gaps” and fissures of our times, most notably the gap between praying and preaching. Drawing from the rich tradition of men and women who followed Christ the Preacher, the author invites the reader to see the golden link between contemplation and action, prayer and preaching, speaking *with* God and speaking *about* God.

St. Catherine of Siena’s vision of St. Dominic emerging from the Father’s breast is one of the striking images in the book. Dominic, as preacher and contemplative, is viewed by Catherine as someone

who goes toward the world loved by God, instead of turning away from it. Like John the beloved disciple at the Last Supper, Dominic at prayer is someone who leans close to the chest of Jesus, *listening to the Lord's heartbeat* (John 13:23). And it is that *listening*, more than anything else, that inevitably quickens the passion to preach. Dominic, moved by the intimate knowledge gained of divine truth and divine love, feels at once compelled to share that knowledge with the world.

Preachers at Prayer is a book that helps the reader understand more deeply what is stated so powerfully in John 1:18: *Only the one who comes from the breast of the Father can make him known*. This book is a must-read for all the members of the Dominican family and for all those who desire to share the warmth of God's love that they know and feel in their hearts.

Introduction

The painter Vincent van Gogh, writing to his brother Theo in the summer of 1880, remarked: “There may be a great fire in our soul, but no one ever seems to come to warm himself at it, and the passers-by see only a little bit of smoke coming through the chimney and pass on their way.”¹ These lines were penned by Van Gogh at the time when his work was being either quietly ignored by his contemporaries or else dismissed out of hand. The great artist was, of course, referring to his own work as a painter and not, therefore, to a conviction regarding the Christian Gospel. Nevertheless, for those who believe they have been called to preach the Word of God, these lines have an immediate resonance.

If the statement is applied to the work of preachers and evangelists today, the fire in the soul can be said to represent nothing less than the Gospel itself. Between this “fire” and contemporary culture, however, a fissure has opened, a rupture, which is impossible to ignore. What, then, needs to be done? Van Gogh, in his letter, offers the following calm, courageous advice. He writes, “[One must] tend that inward fire, have salt in oneself, and wait patiently yet with how much impatience for the hour when somebody will come and

1. Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, ed. Mark Roskill (London: Macmillan, 1963), 122.

sit down near it, to stay there maybe. Let him who believes in God wait for the hour that will come sooner or later.”²

A powerful statement by any standard. But if its message is taken to heart by contemporary Christians, active preachers among them, it will obviously not be enough for them—for us—to sit down at the fire of our own convictions and wait for the world to come around to our point of view. We have not been given the fire of heaven for our own tribal comfort and consolation. We are not to behave as if the Good News were only good news for the righteous few and could never travel beyond the borders of an exclusive tribe or sect. No, as committed believers, we are called “to go up into the gaps” and to cast our fire into the midst.

That phrase, “go up into the gaps,” will no doubt sound familiar to you. It comes from Ezekiel 13 and is one of the most challenging passages in the entire prophetic tradition. Speaking through his prophet, the Lord says of the preachers of that time, “You have not gone up into the gaps to build a wall for the house of Israel to stand in battle on the day of the LORD” (Ezek. 13:5 NKJV). If we take the implied imperative of Ezekiel—“go up into the gaps”—and apply it to our own age and situation, what is the most urgent, most critical message now being announced? Are there “gaps” that today are being ignored? Is there a front line, as it were, that we have not had the courage to face, a challenge that for years perhaps we have been avoiding?

Pope St. Paul VI, having in mind the gap that has opened, and opened wide, between the secular ideologies of our time and the Christian faith tradition, referred to it once, in a brief, vivid phrase,

2. Van Gogh, 122–123.

as “the drama of our time.”³ It is a gap that impacts every man and woman attempting, in a secular age, to follow the path of Christ. Its impact will be felt most especially by those who have been called to preach the Christian Gospel and who, as a result, find themselves standing at the front line as it were between, on the one hand, certain radical expressions of the Gospel tradition and, on the other hand, the forms and fashions of contemporary society.

At Vatican II, it was acknowledged that “the human race is passing through a new stage of its history.” We were alerted to the fact that “profound and rapid changes” were spreading by degrees around the whole world.⁴ So, faced with the gap, the fissure, between faith tradition and the secular world, one of the tasks set for us by the council was to seek continually for new and more effective ways of communicating the Gospel to the men and women of our time, an undertaking that would call for dynamic new initiatives. Needless to say, this task of “making it new,” of going up into the gaps, remains still the great challenge facing us today. But, while seeking in every way possible to allow the Word of God to be heard by our contemporaries, we should, with no less determination, be devoting ever closer attention to that other void or gap in our lives, that inner space that may be no less challenging to confront, that ache for God familiar to us all, our heart’s wound of longing.

When we attempt to go down to the root of our desire and wait on God, we may perhaps experience at first no awareness of the divine, but rather a great sense of emptiness. As a result, it is not always easy to remain there. But to remain there is precisely

3. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 20, apostolic exhortation, December 8, 1975, vatican.va.

4. Second Vatican Council, preface to *Gaudium et Spes* 4, in *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection*, ed. Matthew Levering (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), 217.

what the great tradition so often and so insistently recommends. “Stand still,” Meister Eckhart is fond of repeating, “and do not waver from your emptiness.”⁵ Eckhart is well aware, of course, that many believers—many of us—are still somewhat frightened of that void within and are not always able to believe that God in fact supports us in our emptiness. We panic, and we find, perhaps unconsciously, a wonderful alibi by becoming absorbed in all kinds of projects and plans—*holy* projects, of course, and *holy* plans—anything so long as it will distract us from the void within. But our good works, our great plans for the future, and even our most imaginative projects are all so much “whitewash” (Ezekiel’s phrase) if, at the core, they represent simply an escape from that inner void. *Stand still, and do not waver from your emptiness.*

Van Gogh’s image of staying close to the fire that burns within is, I would suggest, a powerful, salutary image for ourselves today. Whatever new initiatives we undertake, whatever radical changes we make to serve those most in need of help, we are called to stay close to the fire of the Gospel, to the Word heard from the beginning, and to “tend that inward fire” and keep “salt” within ourselves. It goes without saying that the most obvious, most helpful way to keep that salt fresh and tend that inward fire is humble, consistent dedication to the practice of prayer.

That is, of course, what we witness in the lives of the Dominican preachers most celebrated in the tradition. They are men and women who have come to know by experience the true nature of God, and their hearts are on fire as a result. They cannot wait to share their discovery. They have dared to go down to the root of their desire,

5. Meister Eckhart, “Sermon 4,” in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, ed. and trans. Maurice O’C. Walshe (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 59.

and—in the innermost gap of their own spirit—they have found courage to stand still and wait for the warmth, for the fire of the Spirit of God, to come upon them and to capture their hearts once and for all. Fire—the searching, consoling, energizing fire of God’s infinite love.

The Dominican spiritual tradition, I’m happy to say, leaves us in no doubt that even the weakest disciple among us can, here and now, in faith if not in feeling, begin to experience something of this wonderful blessing. That is the good news that, in the chapters which follow, I now intend to explore.

* * *

All four chapters are based on talks that, over several years, I have been asked to give on the subjects of prayer, study, and preaching. But now, as I am about to publish these talks in book form, I am made piercingly aware of my presumption as an author. For, far from being a master of prayer, I am, if the truth be known, even at this late stage in life, no more than a novice. However, remembering with heartfelt gratitude the generous response of those who, over the years, attended these four talks, and the great joy I experienced in giving them, I am encouraged to think that maybe, in this newly published format, the talks might be of some use to others, preachers among them, attentive seekers of truth, men and women of prayer, readers interested in learning more about the Dominican spiritual tradition.

CHAPTER ONE

Prayer into Preaching¹

Recovering the Contemplative Dimension

Although fidelity to the life of prayer and contemplation has been a distinguishing mark of the most celebrated Dominican preachers and saints, the Order itself has been noted, over the centuries, 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, many translations 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, there is an opportunity to enable the contemplative dimension of the Dominican tradition to speak with a new and telling authority to a new generation. Not all forms of contemplation, it has to be said, were affirmed by the early Friars Preachers. In fact, in the *Vitae Fratrum*, there has survived a vivid account of one unfortunate friar who very nearly lost his

1. A talk given originally to the General Chapter of the Dominican Order (Providence, RI, July 2001).

faith from too much “contemplation”!² 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.”³ Now, obviously, Humbert of Romans is not intending somehow 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.”⁴ But the life of prayer and contemplation, which Humbert of Romans and the early Dominicans would recommend, is one that would compel us, in Humbert’s phrase, to “come out into the open”⁵—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 the Dominican 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 Revelation that for centuries had been attributed to Aquinas. The work is now judged, however, to have been composed by a Dominican *équipe* working at Saint-Jacques in Paris under the general supervision of the Dominican Hugh of

2. Gerald de Frachet, *Vitae Fratrum* 3.15, in *Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica* [hereafter, MOFPH] 1, ed. B.M. Reichert (Louvain: Charpentier & Schoonjans, 1896), 112.

3. Humbert of Romans, “Treatise on the Formation of Preachers” 4.17.193. (Humbert is quoting from St. Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Rule*.) See *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings*, ed. Simon Tugwell (New York: Paulist, 1982), 242. I am happy here to express my gratitude to Simon for his work as editor and translator of many of the most important early Dominican texts.

4. “Treatise on the Formation of Preachers” 1.7.96, p. 209.

5. “Treatise on the Formation of Preachers” 4.17.193, p. 242.

Saint-Cher between the years 1240 to 1244.⁶ 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 neighbor”:

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 neighbor [*Intellige ex te ipso quae sunt proximi tui*]. And what you see in Christ and in the world and in your neighbor, write that in your heart.⁷

These lines are memorable for the compassionate attention they give to the neighbor 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 neighbor, 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, to be attentive to all that we see in the world around us and in our neighbor, and to reflect deep within our hearts on the things that we have observed.

6. See Robert E. Lerner, “Poverty, Preaching, and Eschatology in the Revelation Commentaries of Hugh of St Cher,” in *The Bible in the Medieval World: Essays in Memory of Beryl Smalley*, ed. K. Walsh and D. Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 157–189.

7. “Vidit Jacob,” *Expositio Super Apocalypsim* chap. 1, ed. under the name of Thomas Aquinas, in *Opera Omnia, Opuscula Dubia* (Parma: Fiacadori, 1868), 1:334–335. Translations from non-English texts, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.

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.”⁸

What follows divides neatly into three sections:

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

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.⁹

By the time the Dominican Juan de la Cruz 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

8. “Vidit Jacob,” 1:334–335.

9. To appreciate the significance of the Dominican Juan de la Cruz in the history of spirituality, see the introduction by V. Beltrán de Heredia to a work by Juan de la Cruz entitled *Diálogo sobre la necesidad y provecho de la oración vocal*, published in *Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos* (Madrid: La Editorial Católica, 1962), 221:189–210. See also “Jean de la Croix, le Dominicain” by Simon Tugwell in *Mémoire Dominicaine* 2 (Spring 1993): 57–63. A translation of the *Diálogo* was expected to be in print by 1985 as part of the series called *Dominican Sources*. To my knowledge, however, this translation has not yet appeared.

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 humor—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 Nicaea: ‘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!”¹⁰

Behind the invective and sharp humor of 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

10. *Diálogo* 2.10.273, quoted in Tugwell, “Jean de la Croix, le Dominicain,” 59.

himself can grant us in a second. “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!”¹¹ 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 that 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!”¹²

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 on what to do 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, the English Dominican, 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

11. William Peraldus, “Sermon on Prayer,” in *Early Dominicans*, 168.

12. Peraldus, 167.

what we are trying to learn. As a consequence, we get bored and so no doubt does God.”¹³

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.”¹⁴ Teresa tried to follow this path for a while, but she soon realized that a prayer life that excluded Christ, although mystical in some way, was a path wholly mistaken. Illuminating, in this context, is the reaction of a Dominican theologian of the sixteenth century, Francisco de Vitoria, to any kind 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.¹⁵

That last statement from Vitoria betrays, if I am not mistaken, the direct influence of St. Dominic. Dominic never composed for his brethren any kind of devotional or spiritual text or testament. He was

13. See Bede Jarrett, “Contemplation,” in *Meditations for Layfolk* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1946), 182.

14. Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*, trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1957), 153–157.

15. Francisco de Vitoria, *Commentarios a la Segunda Secundae de S. Tomas*, ed. V. Beltrán de Herédia (Salamanca: Biblioteca de Teólogos españoles, 1952), 6:2-2.182.4, quoted in Tugwell, “A Dominican Theology of Prayer,” *Dominican Ashram* 1 (1982): 137.

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."¹⁶ 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 is 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 Vincent McNabb, for example, with characteristic good humor, liked now and again to bring the subject of contemplation back down from the high clouds

16. Jean-Marie Villot, "Homelia in Basilica Sanctae Sabinae," *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum* 39 (July–September 1970): 543.

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.”¹⁷

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.’”¹⁸ 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.

17. Vincent McNabb, *The Craft of Prayer* (London: Burns & Oates, 1935), 77.

18. Quoted in “The Second Way of Prayer” of *The Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic*, in *Early Dominicans*, 95.

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.¹⁹

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.²⁰

CONTEMPLATION: A VISION OF THE WORLD

In some religious traditions, the contemplative life implied an almost complete turning away from the world—in the case of certain ascetic religious, 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 toward contemplation in the lives of the 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 Saint-Jacques in Paris in the thirteenth century: “Among the things a man ought to see in contemplation,” he wrote, “are the needs of his neighbor” and also “how great is the weakness of every human being.” So the authentic

19. Thomas Aquinas, Prayers 1 and 2 of “Piae Preces,” in *Opera Omnia, Opuscula Dubia* (Parma: Fiacadori, 1869), 24:241–242.

20. For some further reflection on the place of Christ in early Dominican spirituality, see *Christ among the Early Dominicans: Representations of Christ in the Texts and Images of the Order of Preachers*, ed. Kent Emery, Jr. and Joseph P. Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).

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."²¹ 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!"²²

21. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue* 18, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist, 1980), 56–57.

22. "It was as a theologian that Thomas cast his choice for the worldliness represented by the works of Aristotle. What is truly exciting about this choice is the reason Thomas gives for it. . . . In Aristotle's fundamental attitude toward the universe, in his affirmation of the concrete and sensuous reality of the world, Thomas recognized something entirely his own, belonging to himself as a Christian. . . . To put it in a nutshell, this element was the same as the Christian affirmation of Creation" (Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962], 48–49).

Pieper's claim 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 favorite image of St. Dominic is one painted on wood, which can be seen at the Church of Santa Maria della Mascarella in Bologna. It records "the miracle of bread," which, according to tradition, took place at the convent of Santa Maria della 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 of the Gospel *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 candor. 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. The characterization of Dominic as "the saint of *interior* experience" (in contrast to Francis of Assisi, "the saint of nature") is accurate only from one limited point of view.²³ Dominic was a man unusually responsive to the world around him. A realist as much as a visionary, he stood out

23. See C. Pera, *La vita interiore di S. Domenico* (Florence: 1921), 66 (emphasis added).

among his contemporaries not only as a man of God but also as someone notably quick, flexible, and generous in his response to the immediate demands of his time.

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.”²⁴ On one occasion, deliberately taking to task those religious people, 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,”²⁵ Yves Congar sought to highlight what he considered an important, if unexpected, lay quality in the Dominican vision of Aquinas. In Congar’s opinion, someone who is “authentically lay,”²⁶ 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.”²⁷ 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

24. Jean-Baptiste Henri Lacordaire, *Le Testament (Notice sur le rétablissement en France de l’Ordre des Frères-Prêcheurs)*, ed. C. de Montalembert (Paris: Douniol, 1870), 43.

25. Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of the Laity*, trans. D. Attwater (London: Chapman, 1959), 17–18.

26. Congar, 21.

27. Congar, 17.

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.²⁸

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 Fr. 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."²⁹ 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."³⁰ 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 toward God. Rather, with the Son of God, Dominic is seen coming out from the One who, from the very beginning, "so loved the world."

28. Yves Congar, "Action et contemplation: D'une lettre du père Congar au père Régamey (1959)," *La Vie Spirituelle* 152, no. 727 (June 1998): 204.

29. See Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. C. Kearns (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1980), 195.

30. *Life of Catherine of Siena*, 195.

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!"³¹ 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 Savior"³²—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 the Dominican life: for example, choir in common, 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 that, 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

31. Congar, "Action et contemplation," 204.

32. "The Early Dominican Constitutions," Second Distinction 31, in *Early Dominicans*, 467. For their chosen model of apostolic and contemplative life, the early Dominicans, while clearly influenced by certain forms of the monastic tradition, looked first and foremost to the life and example of Christ himself. Accordingly, with telling force, Aquinas notes in the *Summa theologiae* that "in order to teach preachers that they should not always be in the public gaze, Our Lord withdrew himself sometimes from the crowd" (*ST* 3.40.1 ad 3). Aquinas notes further that the life of the active preacher "built on an abundance of contemplation" was, in fact, "the life chosen by Christ" (*ST* 3.40.1 ad 2).

in itself, of course, a spiritual activity, even a contemplative one. But, for St. Dominic and the early friars, speaking about God (*de Deo*), which is the grace of preaching, presupposes first speaking with God (*cum Deo*), which is the grace of actual prayer or contemplation.³³ In the apostolic life adopted by the friars, the ecstasy of service or attention to the neighbor 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 Romans' phrase, at least "a pray-er first."³⁴ One does have somehow to surrender oneself to God in prayer with at least the humble ecstasy of hope. "For," as we are reminded in *The Dialogue* of St. Catherine of Siena, "one cannot share what one does not have in oneself."³⁵

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

33. "The Early Dominican Constitutions," Second Distinction 31. The text reads: "like men of the Gospel, following in the footsteps of their Savior, talking either to God or about God, within themselves or with others" (*Early Dominicans*, 467).

34. Humbert is citing Augustine. He writes that the man who gets people to listen to him "should have no doubt that it is thanks to his devout prayers rather than to his well-trained fluency in speech. . . . So let him be a pray-er first, and then a teacher" ("Treatise on the Formation of Preachers" 4.19.233, in *Early Dominicans*, 252). While never overlooking the need for devoted prayer, Humbert openly acknowledges the fact that preaching can, like prayer itself, also be a form of holiness, "for the merit of preaching wins the gift of an increase of interior grace" (1.5.33, p. 195). Humbert even goes so far as to state: "Of all the spiritual exercises commonly practiced by spiritual men, those who have the grace for it ought to prefer the practice of preaching!" (4.21.260, p. 256).

35. Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue* 85, p. 157. In pursuit of the way of salvation, St. Dominic and other Dominicans after him, like St. Thomas, drew inspiration from ancient spiritual authors such as John Cassian. Concerning Dominic, Jordan of Saxony writes, "With the help of grace, this book [*Collationes Patrum*] brought him to . . . considerable enlightenment in contemplation and to a veritable peak of perfection" (*Jordan of Saxony: On the Beginnings of the Order of Preachers* 1.13, trans. Simon Tugwell [Dublin: Dominican, 1982], 3).

and preach (see Mark 16:15). 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."³⁶

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 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 spirit." But, in the opinion of Jordan, "he can never fully have sight of the Lord unless he is with the disciples gathered together in the house."³⁷

In the practice of prayer, both public and private, and in the task of preaching, we discover, *in medio ecclesiae*, "in the midst of the Church," 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

36. The phrase occurs in a prayer addressed to St. Dominic, which may well have been composed, according to Vicaire, around the time of Dominic's canonization. See M.H. Vicaire, *Saint Dominic and His Times*, trans. K. Pond (Green Bay, WI: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 394, 530. The Latin is "apostolicae religioni," which Vicaire renders correctly as "l'observance apostolique."

37. Jordan of Saxony, "Letter to the Brethren at Paris," no. 56, in *Beati Iordani de Saxonia Epistulae*, ed. A. Walz, *MOFPH* 23 (Rome: Institutum Historicum Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1951), 69. See Jordan of Saxony, "Appendix: Other Letters," in *To Heaven with Diana! A Study of Jordan of Saxony and Diana d'Andalò with a Translation of the Letters of Jordan*, trans. Gerald Vann (Chicago: Collins, 1959), 157.

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.”³⁸

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.”³⁹ 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.”⁴⁰ *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

38. *ST 2-2.83.2 ad 3*.

39. Simone Weil, *The Notebooks*, trans. A. Wills (New York: Putnam, 1956), 2:358.

40. Albert Camus, “L’incroyant et les chrétiens: Fragments d’une exposé fait au couvent des dominicains de Latour-Maubourg en 1948,” in *Essais: Actuelles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 1:372.

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 that, 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 in the Order today. Conditions may differ greatly from place to place. But, in this fast-speed, high-tech world, is it not the case that, as a generation, we are more likely 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 anonymous* 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.”⁴¹ This statement is one we understand today, being part of the inheritance that we have received from the twentieth century, and indeed from the thirteenth. But the comment from Chenu that 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

41. M. Humbert Kennedy, “Interview with Marie-Dominique Chenu,” *Dominican Ashram* 5, no. 2 (June 1986): 61.

us, “but I was impressed by the atmosphere of the place.”⁴² 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. 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.”⁴³

The contemplative life itself, of course, receives attention from Aquinas in the *Summa theologiae*. 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.*”⁴⁴

That “freedom of mind,” which comes from contemplation, is not something reserved only for enclosed contemplatives. Preachers, in fact, need that freedom perhaps more than anyone. For without it, they risk becoming prisoners of the spirit and fashions of the age. And what they preach, in the end, will not be the Word of God, but instead some word or some ideology of their own. And *that* word, *that* message, will be of little use to the world, even if preachers appear to be carrying it to the furthest frontiers of human need. For really to “come out into the open,” preachers must first of all, as the Gospel reminds us, make a journey *within*. “God,” Eckhart

42. Kennedy, 59.

43. Kennedy, 59.

44. *ST* 2-2.182.1 ad 2, trans. J. Aumann in Blackfriars Edition, vol. 46 (New York: Blackfriars/McGraw-Hill, 1966), 71.

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.”⁴⁵

CONTEMPLATION: A VISION OF THE NEIGHBOR

In traditional religious literature, the word “ecstasy” is often linked with that of contemplation. But nowadays, on the street, the word means 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 Saint 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.”⁴⁶ “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 neighbors, and the night to God.”⁴⁷ 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 neighbor was not forgotten. According to one of the

45. Meister Eckhart, “Sermon Sixty Nine,” in *Meister Eckhart: German Sermons and Treatises*, ed. M.O.C. Walshe (London: Watkins, 1981), 2:169. It’s worth noting that Eckhart’s splendid phrase “come out into the open” was also used by Humbert of Romans in his “Treatise on the Formation of Preachers” 4.17.193.

46. Meister Eckhart, “Counsels on Discernment” 10, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, trans. E. Colledge and B. McGinn (New York: Paulist, 1981), 258.

47. Jordan of Saxony, *Libellus de Principiis Ordinis Praedicatorum* 105, in *Monumenta Historica Sancti Patris Nostri Dominici*, Fasc. 2, *MOFPH* 16 (Rome: Institutum Historicum Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1933), 75.

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.”⁴⁸

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—that same presence in his own brethren. I have always been struck by a phrase that Yves Congar quoted many years ago from Nicholas Cabasilas. It reads, “Among all visible creatures, human nature alone can truly be an altar.”⁴⁹ 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.’”⁵⁰ And again, echoing that same Pauline vision, Jordan of Saxony, the first Master of the Order after Dominic, wrote to a Dominican community of nuns, “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.”⁵¹

Among all those within the Dominican tradition who have spoken and written concerning the neighbor in contemplation, the

48. John of Bologna, “De Beato Dominico” 17, in *Vitae Fratrum*, 79. Emphasis added.

49. Quoted in Yves Congar, *The Mystery of the Temple*, trans. R.F. Trevett (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1962), 203.

50. Congar, 203.

51. Jordan of Saxony, “Letter to the Dominican Sisters at Bologna,” no. 24, in *Beati Iordani de Saxonía Epistulae*, 28. See Jordan of Saxony, “Letter 11,” in *To Heaven With Diana*, 79.

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,” God said to her, “and you will see the dignity and beauty of my reasoning creature.”⁵² When Catherine opened her mind in prayer, she discovered 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 neighbor. “She immediately feels compelled,” Catherine writes, “to love her neighbor 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.”⁵³

Contained in these few words of Catherine there is, I believe, a profound yet simple truth: the source of her vision of the neighbor 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 neighbor 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 neighbor 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

52. Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue* 1, 25–26.

53. Catherine of Siena, “Letter to Raymond of Capua,” no. 226, in *Le Lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, ed. N. Tommasèo (Siena: Giuntini Bentivoglio, 1922), 3:297.

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.”⁵⁴

The assertion of a willingness to die a hundred times for the sake of the neighbor sounds extreme. But it is typical of Catherine. In another place, she writes, “Here I am, poor wretch, living in my body, yet in desire constantly outside my body! *Oimè! good gentle Jesus! I am dying and cannot die!*”⁵⁵ 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 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.”*⁵⁶

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,

54. Raymond of Capua, *Life of Catherine of Siena*, 146.

55. Catherine of Siena, “Letter to Raymond of Capua,” no. 211, in *Le Lettere*, 3:225. See *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), 2:169.

56. Teresa of Avila, “Poem – 1,” in *The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, ed. Allison Peers (London: Sheed & Ward, 1950), 3:278. Needless to say, the rather sharp contrast indicated here between Teresa and Catherine in no way reflects the full stature and great humanity of the Carmelite.

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 honor, and for everyone’s salvation.”⁵⁷

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 neighbor and the neighbor’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. In one letter, she exclaimed, “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!”⁵⁸

This outburst from Catherine does not mean that she had no appreciation for the ordinary aids and supports necessary for the contemplative life: for example, solitude, recollection, and silence. Silence, in particular, Catherine respected. But what she in no way approved of was the cowardly silence of certain ministers of the Gospel who, in her opinion, ought to have been crying out loud and

57. Noffke, *Letters of Catherine of Siena*, 2:169.

58. Catherine of Siena, “Letter 328 to Brother Antonio of Nizza of the Hermit Brothers of St. Augustine,” in *Le Lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, ed. N. Tommaseo (Siena: Giuntini Bentivoglio, 1940), 5:81.81. See *Saint Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters*, ed. V.D. Scudder (London: J.M. Dent, 1927), 315.

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.”⁵⁹

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.”⁶⁰

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.”⁶¹ 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.”⁶²

59. Catherine of Siena, “Letter 16,” in *Le Lettere di S. Caterina da Siena*, ed. N. Tommaseo (Siena: Giuntini Bentivoglio, 1940), 1:55. See Mary Ann Fatula, *Catherine of Siena’s Way* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987), 72.

60. Quoted in Guy Bedouelle, *In the Image of St. Dominic: Nine Portraits of Dominican Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 99.

61. Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Confessionario*, 1552, O.E. 5:239b, quoted in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Christ* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 15.

62. Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Carta al Consejo*, 1531, O.E. 5:44b, quoted in Gutiérrez, 61.

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, that 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 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.⁶³

In part, of course, this means simply that when he prays, Dominic remembers to intercede for those people he knows to be in

63. Jordan of Saxony, *Libellus de Principiis Ordinis Praedicatorum* 12, p. 32. See Tugwell, *Jordan of Saxony: On the Beginnings of the Order of Preachers* 1.12, p. 3.

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 neighbor’s pain and 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.