

Vowed to Mission

Letter to the Order. Santa Sabina, Rome, 1994

fr. Timothy Radcliffe, OP

The young flocked to the Order in Dominic's time because, with his passion for preaching, he invited them to take part in an adventure. For what are we passionate and what are the adventures of our time? Who are the Cumans for us? We face the challenge of establishing the Order in much of Asia, where half of humanity lives, and preparing to teach in China. Are there young Dominicans ready to learn Chinese and give themselves, not knowing what it will cost them? All over the world we face the dialogue with Islam. Are we ready to give our lives to that?

Like Dominic, we too are faced with preaching the gospel in the new cities, but for us these are the sprawling mega-towns that are home to an ever increasing percentage of humanity, the urban jungle of Los Angeles, São Paulo, Mexico City, Lagos, Tokyo, and London and so on. These are often urban deserts, marked by the and violence, and the dense solitude of those who are surrounded by millions of people and yet are alone. How are we to find our way into the new world of the young, increasingly a single world culture, with its religious hunger and scepticism, its respect of individuals and suspicion of institutions, its distrust of words and fascination with the technology of information, its music and songs? How the we to be in touch with all that is vital and creative in this new culture, learn from it and welcome it for the gospel?

Above all, how are we to be preachers of hope in a world which is often tempted by despair and fatalism, afflicted by an economic system that is undermining the social and economic- structures of most countries of the world? What is the gospel that we can preach in Latin America, or as the Order is established in Asia and reborn in East Europe? And then there is the endless intellectual adventure of study, of wrestling with the Word of God, the exigence of truthfulness, of questioning and being questioned, and the passion to understand. This deserves another letter.

And so, my brothers and sisters, one thing cannot be doubted, that our vocation as preachers of the gospel is as urgently needed as ever before (Avila 22). We can respond to these challenges if we are people of courage, who dare to give up old commitments, so that we can be free to take new initiatives, who dare to experiment and risk failure. We will never be able to respond unless we offer each other confidence and courage. A complex structure, like a religious Order, can either communicate pessimism and a sense of defeat, or it can be a network of hope, in which we help each other to imagine and create the new. If the Order is to be the latter, then we must face a number of questions.

Do we dare to accept into the Order young people who have the daring to face these new challenges with courage and initiative, knowing that they may well put in question much of what we have been and done? Would we happily accept into our own Province a man like Thomas Aquinas, who embraced a new and suspect philosophy and posed hard and searching questions? Would we welcome a brother

like Bartolome de Las Casas, with his passion for social justice? Would we be pleased to have a Fra Angelico who experimented with new ways of preaching the gospel? Would we give profession to Catherine of Siena, with all her outspokenness? Would we welcome Martin de Porres, who might disturb the peace of the community by inviting in all sorts of poor people? Would we accept Dominic? Or might we prefer candidates who will leave us in peace? And what is the result of our initial formation? Is it to produce brothers and sisters who have grown in faith and courage, who dare to try and risk more than when they came to us at first? Or do we tame them and make them safe?

If we are to face the immense and exciting challenges of today, and renew that sense of the adventure of religious life, then we will have to look at many aspects of our life as an Order in subsequent letters. Today, in this letter, I would like to explore only one question, which I have found raised in every part of the Order during my travels. How can the vows that we have made be a source of life and dynamism, and sustain us in our preaching? The vows are not the whole of our religious life, but it is often in relation to them that the brothers and sisters pose searching questions that we must address together. It is often said that the vows are only a means. And this is true, for the Order was founded not so that we might live the vows but for the preaching of the gospel. But the vows are not merely a means in an utilitarian sense, as a car might be to get from one place to another. The vows are means towards us becoming people who truly are missionary. St. Thomas says that all the vows have as their goal *caritas*,¹ the love that is the very life of God. They serve their purpose only if they help us to grow in love, so that we may speak with authority of the God of love.

The vows are in fundamental contradiction with the values of much of society, particularly of the culture of consumerism which is rapidly becoming the dominant culture of our planet. The vow of Obedience goes against an understanding of being human as rooted in radical autonomy and individualism; to be poor is a sign of failure and worthlessness in our culture, and chastity seems to be an unimaginable rejection of the universal human right to sexual fulfilment. If we embrace the vows, then it is likely that at some stage we will find it hard to endure. They may seem to condemn us to frustration and sterility. If we accept them merely as a utilitarian means to an end, a necessary inconvenience of the life of the preacher, then they may seem a price that is not worth paying. But if we live them as ordered towards *caritas*, one way among others of sharing in the life of the God of love, then we may believe that the suffering may be fertile, and the dying that we experience may open up a way to resurrection. Then we may be able to say, like our brother Reginald of Orleans: "I do not believe that I have gained any merit in living in this Order, for here I have always found so much joy."²

In this letter I wish to offer a few simple observations about the vows. They will be largely marked by my own limitations, and the culture which has formed me. My hope is that they will contribute to a dialogue through which we will arrive at some common vision that will enable us to encourage each other, and give us the strength to be an Order which dares to take up the challenges of the next century.

Daring to Vow

In many parts of the world, especially those marked by Western culture, there has been a profound loss of confidence in the making of promises. This can be seen in the collapse of marriage, the high rate of divorce or, within our own Order, the regular requests for dispensation from the vows, the slow steady hemorrhaging of the life blood of the Order. What sense can it make to give one's word usque ad mortem?

One reason why the giving of one's word may not seem to be a serious matter may be a weakening of our sense of the importance of our words. Do words matter that much in our society? Can they make a difference? Can one offer one's life to another, to God or in marriage, by speaking a few words? We preachers of the Word of God are witnesses that words matter. We are made in the image of God who spoke a word and the heavens and the earth came to be. He spoke a Word that became flesh for our redemption. The words that human beings speak to each other offer life or death, build community or destroy it. The terrible solitude of our vast cities is surely a sign of a culture that has sometimes ceased to believe in the importance of language, to believe that it can build community through language shared. When we give our word in the vows we witness to a fundamental human vocation, to speak words which have weight and authority.

Yet we cannot know what our vows will mean and where they will lead us. How do we dare to make them? Surely only because our God has done so, and we are his children. We dare to do as our Father did first. From the beginning, the history of salvation was of the God who made promises, who promised to Noah that never again would the earth be overwhelmed by flood, who promised to Abraham descendants more numerous than the sand, and who promised to Moses to lead his people out of bondage. The culmination and astonishing fulfilment of all those promises was Jesus Christ, God's eternal 'Yes'. As God's children we dare to give our word, not knowing what it will mean. And this act is a sign of hope since for many people there is only the promise. If one is locked in despair, destroyed by poverty or unemployment or imprisoned by one's own personal failure, then maybe there is nothing in which one can put one's hope and trust other than in the God who has made vows to us, who again and again has offered a covenant to humanity and through the prophets taught us to hope for salvation (Fourth Eucharist prayer).

In this world so tempted by despair there may be no other source of hope than trust in the God who has given us his Word. And what sign is there of that vow given, other than men and women who dare to take vows, whether of marriage or in religious life. I have never understood so clearly the meaning of our vows as when I went to visit a barrio on the edges of Lisbon, inhabited by the very poorest of people, the forgotten and invisible of the city, and found the quarter alive with rejoicing, because a sister who shared their lives was to make her solemn profession. It was their feast.

Ours has been called "The Now Generation", the culture in which there is only the present moment. This can be the source of a wonderful spontaneity, a freshness and immediacy in which we should rejoice. But if the present moment is one of poverty or failure, of defeat or depression, then what hope can there be? The vows

of their nature reach out to an unknown future. For St. Thomas, to make a vow was an act of radical generosity, because one gave in a single moment a life which was to be lived successively through time. ³ For many people in our culture this offer of a future which cannot be predicted may make no sense. How can I bind myself until death when I do not know who or what I shall become? Who will I be in ten or twenty years time? Whom will I have met and what will draw my heart? For us it is a sign of our dignity as the children of God and of trust in the God of providence, who offers unexpectedly the ram caught in the bushes. The taking of vows remains an act of the deepest significance, a sign of hope in the God who promises us a future, even when it is beyond our imagining, and who will keep his word.

It is true that sometimes a brother or sister may find themselves incapable of continuing in the vows they have taken. This may be because of a lack of discernment in the time of initial formation, or simply because this is a life that, in all honesty, they can no longer bear. Then there exists the wise provision of the possibility of dispensation from the vows. Let us at least give thanks for what they have given, and rejoice in what we have shared! Let us also ask whether, in our communities, we did all that we could to sustain them in their vows.

OBEDIENCE: THE FREEDOM OF THE CHILDREN OF GOD

The beginning of Jesus' preaching was his proclamation of the fulfilment of Isaiah's promise, freedom for prisoners and liberty for those who are oppressed (Luke 4). The gospel which we are called to preach is of the irrepressible freedom of the children of God. "For Freedom Christ has set us free". (Gal 5:1) It is therefore paradoxical that we give our lives to the Order, to preach this gospel, by a vow of obedience, the only vow we pronounce. How can we speak of freedom who have given away our lives?

The vow of obedience is a scandal in a world which aspires to freedom as its highest value. But what is the freedom for which we hunger? This is a question that is being posed with particular intensity in the countries which have been liberated from Communism. They have entered the "free world", but is this the freedom for which they have fought? There is certainly a certain important freedom gained, in the political process, but the freedom of the market place is often a disappointment. It does not bring the liberation that it promised, and tears apart the fabric of human society even more deeply. Above all, our supposedly free world is often characterised by a deep sense of fatalism, an impotence to take our destinies into our hands, to really shape our lives, that must make us question the freedom of the consumerist culture. The vow of obedience, then, is not for us merely an administrative convenience, a utilitarian means. It must confront us with a question: What is the freedom for which we long in Christ? How might this vow express that, and help us preachers of the Kingdom to live the exultant liberty of the children of God?

When the disciples find Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman by the well, he says to them: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me" (Jn 4.34). The obedience of Jesus to the Father is not a limitation of his freedom, a restriction of his

autonomy. It is the food that gives him strength and makes him robust. It is his relationship to the Father, the gift of all that he is, his very being.

This deep freedom of Jesus, to belong to the Father, is surely the context in which we reflect upon what it means for us to be free, and to give our lives to the Order. It is not the freedom of the consumer, with unrestricted choice between alternative purchases or courses of action; it is the freedom to be, the freedom of the one who loves. Within our own Dominican tradition this belonging together in mutual obedience is marked by a tension between two characteristics: an unqualified gift of our lives to the Order, and a search for consensus based on debate and mutual attentiveness and respect. Both are necessary if we are to be preachers of the freedom of Christ, the freedom for which the world thirsts. If we fail to really give ourselves to the Order, without condition, then we become merely a group of independent individuals who occasionally co-operate; if obedience is experienced as the imposition of the will of the superior, without the search for a common mind, then our vow becomes alienating and inhuman.

1) Obedience and listening

Obedience is not, in our tradition, fundamentally the submission of the will of a brother or sister to a superior. Because it is an expression of our fraternity with each other, the shared life within the Order, it is based on dialogue and discussion. As is so often remarked, the word obedire comes from ob-audire, to listen. The beginning of true obedience is when we dare to let our brother or sister speak and we listen to them. It is the "principle of unity"(LCO.17.1) It is also when we are summoned to grow as human beings by being attentive to others. Married people have no option but to be drawn beyond themselves by the demands of the children and spouses. Our way of life, with its silence and solitude can help us to grow in attentiveness and generosity, but we also run the risk of being locked within ourselves and our own concerns. Religious life can produce people who are deeply selfless or profoundly egoistic, depending upon whether we have listened. It requires all of our attention, complete receptivity. The fertile moment of our redemption was the obedience of Mary who dared to listen to an angel.

This is a listening that demands using our intelligence. In our tradition, we use our reason not so as to dominate the other, but so as to draw near to them. As P. Rousselot said, intelligence is "the faculty of the other". It opens our ears to hear. As Herbert McCabe wrote:

"it is first an openness of the mind such as is involved in all learning. Obedience only becomes perfect when the one who commands and the one who obeys come to share one mind. The notion of blind obedience makes no more sense in our tradition than would blind learning. A totally obedient community would be one in which no one was ever compelled to do anything" 4.

It follows that the primary place in which we practice obedience, in the Dominican tradition, is the community chapter, in which we argue with each other. The function of discussion within the Chapter is to seek unity of heart and mind as we seek the common good. We argue together, as good Dominicans, not so as to win but in the hope of learning from each other. What we seek is not the victory of the

majority but, if at all possible, unanimity. This search for unanimity, even if it is sometimes unattainable, does not express just a desire to live in peace with each other. More radically it is a form of government born of a belief that those with whom we disagree have something to say, and we therefore cannot attain the truth alone. Truth and community are inseparable As Malachy O'Dwyer wrote:

"Why did Dominic place so much trust and confidence in his companions? The answer is a simple one. He was profoundly a man of God, convinced that the hand of God lay upon everything and everyone ... If he was convinced that God was indeed speaking to him through voices other than his own then he had to organise his family in such a way that all within the family could be heard." 5

It follows that government within our tradition takes time. Most of us are busy and this time may seem wasted. Why should we spend time debating with each other when we could be out preaching and teaching? We do so because it is this shared life, this lived solidarity, that makes us to be preachers. We can speak of Christ only out of what we live, and the labour of seeking to be of one heart and mind trains us to speak with authority of the Christ in whom is all reconciliation.

Obedience for us is not the flight from responsibility. It structures the different ways in which we share it. Often the role of a prior is difficult because some brethren believe that having elected him to office, he alone must bear the burden. This inculcates a puerile attitude to authority. Obedience demands that we grasp the responsibility that is ours, otherwise we shall never respond to the challenges that face the Order. As I said at the meeting of European Provincials at Prague in 1993:

"Responsibility is the ability to respond. Will we? In my own experience as a Provincial I have seen 'the mystery of the disappearing responsibility.' It is as mysterious as a novel of Sherlock Holmes! A Provincial Chapter sees there is a problem and commissions the Provincial to face it and resolve it. A bold decision must be taken. He tells the Provincial Council to consider. The Council appoints a Commission to consider what is to be done. They take two or three years clarifying exactly what is the problem. And they then commit it to the next Provincial Chapter, and so the cycle of irresponsibility continues."

Sometimes what paralyses the Order and prevents us from daring to do new things is the fear of accepting responsibility, of risking failure. We must each grasp the responsibility that is ours, even if it is painful to do so and we risk making the wrong decision, otherwise we shall die of irrelevancy.

It may be argued that our system of government is not the most efficient A more centralised and authoritarian government would enable us to respond more rapidly to crises, to take wise decisions based on wide knowledge of the Order. There is often an impulse towards the centralisation of authority. But, as Bede Jarrett OP wrote seventy years ago,

"to those who live under its shadow, liberty in electing government is too blessed a thing to be put aside even at the risk of inefficiency. With all its inherent weakness, for them it mates better than autocracy, however beneficent, with the

independence of human reason and the strengthening of human will. Democracy may mar results, but it makes men." 6

It may sometimes lead to inefficiency but it makes preachers. Our form of government is profoundly linked to our vocation as preachers, for we can only speak with authority of our freedom in Christ if we live it with each other. But our tradition of democracy and of decentralisation can never be an acceptable excuse for immobility and irresponsibility. It should not be a way of hiding from the challenges of our mission.

2) Obedience and self-gift

The democratic tradition of the Order, our stress on shared responsibility, and on debate and dialogue, might suggest that the demands upon us of obedience are less total than in a more autocratic and centralised system. Is not obedience, then, always a compromise between what I wish and what the Order asks? Might one not bargain for a certain limited autonomy? I do not believe this to be so. Fraternity asks of us all that we are. Because, like all the vows, it is ordered towards caritas, an expression of love, then it must be whole-hearted. There will inevitably be a tension between the process of dialogue, the search for consensus, and the moment of handing oneself into the hands of the brethren, but it is a fruitful tension rather than a negotiated compromise. Although I speak most especially out of my experience of government by the brethren, I hope that much of what follows might be helpful to our sisters.

I started by pointing out the immensity of the challenges that we face as an Order. We can face these challenges only if we are able to form new common projects, and give up apostolates that may be dear to us as individuals or Provinces. We must dare to try new experiments, risking failure. We must have the courage sometimes to give up institutions that have been important in the past and may still be significant. If we do not, we shall be prisoners of our past. We must have the courage to die if we are to live. This will demand mobility of mind and heart and body, as Provinces and as individuals. If we are to build up proper centres of formation and study in Africa and Latin America, rebuild the Order in Eastern Europe, face the challenges of China, of preaching in the world of the young, dialogue with Islam and other religions, then inevitably there are apostolates that we will have to give up. Otherwise we shall never do anything new.

For me this wholehearted gift of one's life to the brethren is more than just the necessary flexibility which a complex organisation needs to respond to new challenges. It belongs to the freedom in Christ that we preach. It belongs to the *lex libertatis* 7, the law of freedom of the New Covenant. On the night he was betrayed, when his life was doomed to failure, Jesus took bread, broke it, gave it to his disciples and said: "This is my body, and I give it to you". Faced with his fate, for "it was necessary that the Son of man be handed over", he made this supreme gesture of liberty, giving his life away. Our profession, when we place our lives in the hands of the provincial, is a eucharistic gesture of mad liberty. "This is my life and I give it to you. It is thus that we give ourselves to the mission of the Order, "appointed entirely for the complete evangelisation of the Word of God". (LCO III)

When a brother gives his life into our hands this implies that we are under a corresponding obligation. We must dare to ask much of him. A Provincial must have the courage to believe that the brethren of his Province are capable of doing wonderful things, more than they may ever imagine. Our system of government must express an astonishing confidence in each other, as when Dominic scandalized his contemporaries in sending out the novices to preach, saying "Go confidently, because the Lord will be with you, and he will put into your mouth the word of preaching".⁸ If a member of the Order has freely given his life then we honour that gift in freely asking of each other, even if it means leaving behind a project that he dearly loves and has flourished in. Otherwise the Order will be paralysed. We should invite each other to give our lives to new projects, to dare to grasp the challenges of the moment, rather than just to use them to keep alive institutions or communities that are no longer vital to our preaching.

There are challenges before us today where a response of the whole Order is necessary. The evangelisation of China may be one such. In such cases the Master will have to call upon the Provinces to be generous and give brothers to new areas of mission, even if this has consequences that are hard to bear. I approached one Provincial to discuss the gift of a brother for our new General Vicariate in Russia and the Ukraine. It was with great hesitation since I knew that he was a brother whom this Province could ill afford to lose. The Provincial said to me, "If God's providence has prepared this brother for this work, then we too must trust in God's providence for our needs."

Nothing new can ever be born unless we dare to give up what has been proved to have value in favour of that which may turn out to be a failure. One cannot know in advance. The pressure of our society is that one should have a career, a life that goes somewhere. To give one's life to the preaching of the gospel is to renounce that reassurance. We are people who have no career, no prospects. That is our freedom. I think of the courage of our brethren who are establishing the Order in Korea, struggling with a new language and an unknown culture, with no guarantee in advance that this gift of their lives will bear fruit. That is only a gift of the Lord, as was the resurrection after the failure of the cross. A true gift is, of its nature, a surprise.

One of the ways in which we may have to live out this generosity is in accepting election as a prior, provincial or as a member of a Conventual or Provincial Council. In many provinces it has become hard to find capable brethren who are prepared to accept office. The search for a superior becomes a matter of finding someone who is willing to let his name be proposed to chapter. We look for 'candidates'. Yet it seems to me that the only reason for accepting such a position is because one is obedient to the desires of one's brethren and not because one wishes to be a "candidate". There may be good objective reasons for refusing office, which must be taken seriously and possibly accepted, after confirmation by the higher authority. These should be grave reasons, rather than just the fact that one is not attracted by the idea of holding office.

On the Mountain of the Transfiguration, Peter is fascinated by the vision of glory that he has seen. He wishes to build tents and stay there. He resists the call of Jesus to walk on the way to Jerusalem, where he must suffer and die. He fails to

see that it is in that death on the cross that the glory will be revealed. Sometimes we remain fascinated by the glory of our past, the glory of the institutions which our brethren before us built. Our gratitude to them should be expressed in searching for ways to meet today's challenges. Like Peter we may be hypnotised and paralysed, and resist the invitation to get up and walk, to share in death and resurrection. Every Province must face death in every generation, but there is the sterile death of those who remain stuck on the mountain of Transfiguration when the Lord has left, and there is the fertile death of those who have dared to take the road and travel with him to the mountain of Calvary, and which leads to resurrection.

POVERTY: THE GENEROSITY OF THE GRACIOUS GOD

Poverty is the vow for which it is hardest to find words that ring true, and this is for two reasons. Those brothers and sisters who have come closest to being really poor are often the most reticent to talk about it. They know how much of what we say about poverty and about the "option for the poor" is empty rhetoric. They know just how terrible are the lives of the poor, often without hope, with the daily, grinding violence, the boredom, the insecurity and the dependence. Those of us who have seen, even from afar, what poverty is like are usually suspicious of easy words. Can we ever really know ourselves what it means to live that degradation, insecurity and hopelessness?

A second reason that it is so hard to write about poverty is that what it means to be poor is so different from one society to another, depending upon the nature of family ties, the type of economy, the social provisions made by the State and so on. Poverty means one thing in India, where there is a long tradition of the holy beggar, another in Africa where in most cultures riches are seen as God's blessing, and yet another in the consumerist culture of the West. What it means for us to take a vow of poverty is more culturally determined than for obedience or chastity. The size and location of the community, the apostolates of the brethren, impose different constraints that should make us wary of too easy judgments upon how well others are living this vow.

It is, like all the vows, in the first place, a means. It offers us the freedom to go anywhere and preach. You cannot be a wandering preacher if you must transport all your furniture every time you move. In the Bull Cum Spiritus Fervore of 1217 Honorius III wrote that Dominic and his brethren:

"in the fervour of the spirit that animated them, cast off the burden of the riches of this world and being shod with zeal to propagate the gospel had resolved to exercise the office of preaching in the humble state of voluntary poverty, exposing themselves to numberless sufferings and dangers for the salvation of others" 9

We are invited to give up not merely wealth to follow Christ, but "brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers for my sake". The renunciation that gives us freedom implies a radical break with our family ties as well, a disinheritance. The consequences of this need to be thought out with great delicacy since the nature of the family has changed in many societies. Our families today are often marked by divorce and remarriage, and in some societies our brothers and sisters are

increasingly likely to be only children. We do have real obligations to our parents but how are these to be reconciled with the radical self-gift that we have made of our lives to the preaching of the gospel through our vows in the Order? It is paradoxical that it is often the members of the family who are in religious vows who are considered to be "free" to help look after aged or ill parents. We will need to reflect on this with great sensitivity.

The vow of poverty offers us freedom to give ourselves without reservation to the preaching of the gospel but it is not just a means in a narrow and utilitarian sense. Like the other vows it is, as Thomas wrote, ordered towards *caritas*, the love that is the very life of God. How can we live it so that we can talk about God with authority?

One way to answer this would be to explore how poverty touches fundamental aspects of that sacrament of love which is the Eucharist. For the Eucharist is the sacrament of unity which poverty destroys; it is the sacrament of vulnerability, which the poor endure; it is the moment of gift, which our culture of consumption resists. To ask how we may and should be poor, is to ask how we should live eucharistically.

1) Invisibility

On the night before he died Jesus gathered the disciples around the table to celebrate the new covenant. It was the birth of a home in which all might belong, since he embraced all that might destroy human community: betrayal, denial, even death. The scandal of poverty is that it rips apart what Christ has made one. Poverty is not just an economic condition, the lack of food and clothing or employment. It tears apart the human family. It alienates us from our sisters and brothers. Lazarus at the door of the rich man's house is not merely excluded from sharing his food but from sitting at his table. The unbridgeable abyss that separates them after death merely reveals what had been the case during their lifetimes. In our world today the rift between rich and poor countries, and within these countries themselves, is becoming ever more acute. Even within the rich countries of the European Community there are almost twenty million unemployed. The body of Christ is dismembered.

The voluntary poverty that we vow has value not because it is in any sense good to be poor. Poverty is terrible. It matters only if it is a reaching out across the boundaries that separate human beings from each other, a presence with our separated brothers and sisters. What possible authority could our words about our unity in Christ have if we do not dare to make this journey? During the last year I have seen how much our sisters have to teach the brethren, by their quiet presence among the poor in so many parts of the world. They know the importance of just being there as a sign of the Kingdom.

The Eucharist is the foundation of the universal human home. Would a poor person feel at home and welcomed in our communities? Would they feel that their dignity was respected? Or might they feel intimidated and small? Do our buildings attract or repel? One of the ways that the poor are removed from the human community is by becoming invisible and inaudible. They disappear, the *desaparecidos*, like

Lazarus at the door of the rich man. When one arrives at Calcutta Railway Station, the beggars rush up and thrust their deformities at one. They demand to be seen, to be visible. Do we dare to look for fear of what we might see, a brother or a sister?

2) Vulnerability

In the Last Supper Christ embraced his suffering and his death. He accepted the ultimate vulnerability of being human, liability to be wounded and killed. Our vow of poverty surely invites us to embrace our human vulnerability. In the Bull of Honorius III that I quoted above, Dominic and the brethren are praised not merely for being poor but for "exposing themselves to numberless sufferings and dangers for the salvation of others". In what sense do we ever share even a glimpse of the vulnerability of the poor?

How ever little we eat, for us there is always an escape route if we can endure it no more. The Order will not let us die of hunger. Yet I have met brothers and sisters who have dared to go as far as they can, for example in one of the most violent barrios of Caracas. They endure the danger and exhaustion of living every day in a world where violence is all pervasive. That is a real vulnerability which could cost them their lives. I think of our brothers and sisters in Haiti, whose brave stand for justice puts their life at risk. In Algeria and Cairo our brothers choose to remain, despite all the dangers, as a sign of their hope for reconciliation between Christians and Muslims. In Guatemala our indigenous sisters wear clothes of their own people, so that they may share their daily humiliation. If they wore a traditional habit they would be insulated from that. Not all of us are called to this degree of exposure. There are different tasks within the Order. But we can support them, listen to them and learn from them. The seedbed of our theology is their experience.

This call of Christ to vulnerability must put questions as to how we live the vow of poverty together. Do we dare even live the vulnerability which is presupposed by the common life? Do we really live out of the common purse? Do we live the insecurity of giving to the community all that we receive, exposed to the risk that they might not give us all that we think we need? How can we speak of the Christ who put himself into our hands, if we do not? Are our communities divided into financial classes? Are there some who have access to more money than others? Is there a real sharing of wealth between the communities of a Provinces, or between Provinces?

3) Gift

At the heart of our lives is the celebration of that moment of utter vulnerability and generosity, when Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to his disciples saying "Take and eat, this is my body, given to you." At the centre of the gospel is a moment of pure gift. This is where the *caritas* which is the life of God becomes most tangible. It is a generosity that our society finds hard to grasp, for it is a market in which everything is to be bought and sold. What sense can it make of the God who shouts out "Come to me all you who are thirsty and I will give you food without price." All human societies have markets, the buying and selling and

exchange of goods. Western society differs in being a market. It is the fundamental model that dominates and forms our conception of society, of politics and even of each other. Everything is for sale. The infinite fertility of nature, the land, water have become commodities. Even we human beings are on the "labour market". This culture of consumerism threatens to engulf the whole world, and it claims to do so in the name of freedom, but it locks us in a world where nothing is free. Even when we become aware of the distress of the poor and seek to respond, so often caritas has been monetarised into "charity", in which the gift of money is substituted for the sharing of life.

How can we be preachers of the gracious and generous God, who gives us his life, if we are caught up in this all-pervasive culture? One of the most radical demands of the vow of poverty is surely that we so live in simplicity to see the world differently and gain some glimpse of the utterly gracious God. The lives of our communities should be marked by a simplicity which helps liberate us from the illusory promises of our culture of consummation, and from "the domination of wealth" (LCO 31.1). The world looks different from the back of a Mercedes than it does from the seat of a bicycle. Jordan of Saxony said that Dominic was "a true lover of poverty", perhaps not because poverty is in itself lovable but because it can disclose to us our deepest desires. I have often been struck by the joyfulness and spontaneity of our brothers and sisters who live in simplicity and poverty.

In some parts of the Order the very language that we use when describing our common life suggests that we should be attentive to the dangers of absorbing the values of the world of business. The brethren or sisters become "personnel"; we have "personnel boards"; the role of a superior becomes that of "management" or "administration", and we study "management techniques". Can one imagine Dominic as the first President of the Order of Preachers Incorporated? How often does a Provincial prevent a brother from seeking new and creative ways of preaching and teaching because the Province would suffer financially?

The buildings in which we live are gifts. Do we live in them and treat them with gratitude? Do we have a responsible attitude to what we are given, for the fabric of our buildings, for what we receive? Do we need the buildings that we have? Could our buildings be better used? Bursars often have a thankless task, even though they have a vital role in helping us to live with the responsibility that we owe to those who are generous to us.

CHASTITY: THE FRIENDSHIP OF GOD

We have an urgent need in the Order to think together about the meaning of the vow of Chastity. It touches issues central to our humanity: our sexuality, our bodiliness, our need to express and receive affection, and yet frequently we fear to talk. So often it is an area in which we struggle alone, afraid of judgement or incomprehension. It may be useful to prepare a further letter on this subject in the future.

It is of course true that this vow is, like the others, a means. It gives us the freedom to preach, the mobility to respond to the needs of the Order. But with this vow it is perhaps especially important that it is not merely endured as a grim

necessity. Unless we can learn, perhaps through much time and suffering, to embrace it positively, then it can poison our lives. And we can do so because it is, like all the vows, ordered towards caritas, towards that love which is the very life of God. It is a particular way of loving. If it is not that, then it will lead us to frustration and sterility.

The first sin against chastity is a failure to love. It was said of Dominic that "since he loved all, he was loved by all."¹⁰ What is at issue, yet again, is the authority of our preaching. How can we speak of the God of love if that is not a mystery that we live? If we do so, then it will ask of us death and resurrection. The temptation is to take flight. One common escape route is activism, to lose ourselves in hectic work, even good and important work, so as to flee the solitude. We may even be tempted to flee from the fact of our sexuality, our bodiliness. Yet the Order was born precisely in the struggle against such dualism. Dominic was the one who preached against the division of body and soul, spirit and matter. It remains a modern temptation. Much of modern culture is deeply dualistic. Pornography, which appears to delight in sexuality, is in reality a flight from it, a refusal of that vulnerability that human relationship demands. The voyeur keeps his distance, invulnerable and in control, afraid.

It is our corporeality that is blessed and made holy in the Incarnation. If we are to be preachers of the Word become flesh, then we cannot deny or forget what we are. Do we care for the bodies of our brethren, making sure that they have enough food, tend them when they are sick, be tender to them when they are old? When Bede Jarrett wrote to encourage a young Benedictine who was enduring the first sufferings of friendship, he wrote:

"I am glad because I think your temptation has been towards Puritanism, a narrowness, a certain inhumanity. Your tendency was almost towards the denial of the hallowing of matter. You were in love with the Lord, but not properly with the Incarnation. You were really afraid."¹¹

The basis of our chastity can never be fear, fear of our sexuality, fear of our bodiliness, fear of people of the other sex. Fear is never a good foundation for religious life. For the God who drew near to us dared to become flesh and blood, even though it led to crucifixion. Ultimately this vow demands of us that we follow where God has gone before. Our God has become human, and invites us to do so as well.

St. Thomas Aquinas makes the startling claim that our relationship with God is one of friendship, *amicitia*. The good news that we preach is that we share in the infinite mystery of the friendship of Father and Son which is the Spirit. And indeed Thomas argues that the "evangelical counsels" are the counsels offered by Christ in friendship.¹² One way that we live that friendship is the vow of chastity. To help us reflect upon what it demands of us, let us briefly reflect upon two aspects of that Trinitarian love. It is utterly generous and unpossessive, and it is the love between equals.

1) An unpossessive love

It is that utterly generous and unpossessive love by which the Father gives all that He is to the Son, including his divinity. It is not a sentiment or a feeling, but the love that grants the Son being. All human love, of married people or religious, should seek to live and share in this mystery, in its unpossessive generosity.

We must be completely unambiguous as to what this loving demands of us who are vowed to chastity. It means not just that we do not marry but that we abstain from sexual activity. It asks of us a real and clear renunciation, an asceticism. If we pretend otherwise and willingly accept compromises, then we enter upon a path that may be ultimately impossible to sustain and cause us and others terrible unhappiness.

The first thing that we are asked to do is to believe that the vow of chastity really can be a way of loving, that though we may pass through moments of frustration and desolation, it is a path that can lead to our flourishing as affectionate, whole human beings. The older members of our community are often signs of hope for us. We meet men and women who have passed through the trials of chastity, and emerged into the liberty of those who can love freely. They can be for us signs that with God nothing is impossible.

The entry to this free and unpossessive love will take time. We may endure failures and discouragement on the way. Now that many people enter the Order when they are older, having had sexual experience, then we must not think of it so much as an innocence that we may lose but an integrity of heart into which we may grow. Even moments of failure may, in the grace of God, belong to the path by which we mature, for "we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him". (Romans 8:28)

Our communities should be places in which we must give each other courage when one's heart hesitates, forgiveness when one fails and truthfulness when one is tempted by self-deceit. We must believe in the goodness of our brothers or sisters when they ceased to believe it of themselves. Nothing is more poisonous than self-despising As Damian Byrne wrote in his letter on 'The Common Life':

"While the deepest sanctuary of our hearts is given to God - we have other needs. He has made us so that a large area of our life is accessible to others and is needed by others. Each one of us needs to experience the genuine interest of the other members of the community, their affection, esteem and fellowship ... Life together means breaking the bread of our minds and hearts with each other. If religious do not find this in their communities - then they will seek it elsewhere."

Sometimes the passage to real freedom and integrity of heart will demand that we pass through the valley of death, that we find ourselves faced only, it may seem, with sterility and frustration. Is it really possible to make this journey without prayer? There is first of all the prayer that we share with the community, the daily prayer that is fundamental to our lives. But there is also the silent and private prayer, that brings us face to face with God, in moments of unavoidable truth and astonishing mercy. Here one can learn to hope. Dominic himself would sometimes, when he walked, invite the brethren to go ahead so that he could be alone to pray and in an early version of the Constitutions Dominic said that the novice master

should teach his novices to pray in silence.¹³ Our nuns have much to teach the brethren about the value of prayer in silence.

2) The love that gives equality

Finally, the love that is at the heart of God is utterly fertile. It is generative, creative of all that is. What we struggle with in chastity is not just the need for affection but the desire to beget, to bring to birth. Our care for each other must surely include an attentiveness to the creativity that each one of us has, and which our lives as Dominicans should liberate for the gospel. This may be the creativity of a brother or sister bringing a community into being in a parish, or the intellectual labour of a theologian, or the prenovices in El Salvador performing spontaneous theatre. Our chastity must never be sterile.

The love that is God is so fertile as to create equality. The Trinity is without domination or manipulation. It is not patronising or condescending. This is the love that our vow of chastity invites us to live and preach. As Thomas wrote, friendship finds or creates equality.¹⁴ The fraternity of our Dominican tradition, the democratic form of government in which we delight, expresses not just a way of organising our lives and taking decisions, but expresses something of the mystery of the life of God. That the brethren are known as the *Ordo fratrum praedicatorum* embodies what it is that we preach, the mystery of that love of perfect equality that is the Trinity.

This should characterize all our relationships. The Dominican Family, with its recognition of each other's dignity, and the equality of all members of the family belongs to our living this vow well. The relationship between sisters and brothers, religious and laity, should also be a 'holy preaching'. Even our search for a more just world, in which the dignity of every human being will be respected, is not merely a moral imperative, but an expression of the mystery of the love that is the life of the Trinity which we are called to embody.

Conclusion

When Dominic used to walk through villages where his life was threatened by the Albigensians, he used to sing loudly so that everyone knew that he was there. The vows only have any value if they liberate us for the mission of the Order with some of Dominic's courage and joy. They should not be a heavy burden to weight us down, but grant us a freedom to walk lightly as we go to new places to do new things. What I have written in this letter gives only a very inadequate expression of how this may be so. I hope that together we may build a shared vision of our life as Dominicans, vowed to mission, that may strengthen us on the journey and free us to sing.

END NOTES

1 eg. 2a2ae q184 a3

2 Jordan of Saxony, *Libellus* 64

- 3 ST. 2a 2ae q.186 a.6 ad2
- 4 Herbert McCabe OP, *God Matters* London 1987
- 5 "Pursuing Communion in Government: Role of the Community Chapter", *Dominican Monastic Search. Vol II Fall/Winter 1992* p. 41
- 6 *The Life of St. Dominic* London 1924 p 128
- 7 ST. 1a2ae q108 a4
- 8 *Acta Canon.* 24
- 9 quoted by Marie-Humbert Vicaire, "The Order of St. Dominic in 1215" in ed. Peter B. Lobo OP, *The Genius of St. Dominic* p75
- 10 Jordan of Saxony *Libellus* 107, cf LCO 25
- 11 ed Bede Bailey, Aidan Bellenger and Simon Tugwell *Letters of Bede Jarrett Dominican Sources in English Vol. 5, Downside and Blackfriars*, p. 180
- 12 1a 2ae q108 a4
- 13 *Primitive Constitutions. Dist I. cXIII*
- 14 1 *Ethicorum* 1.8 s.7