

IN OUR KEEPING

June 27, 2012

THE HOLY PREACHING FROM A NUN'S PERSPECTIVE

Sr. Mary Thomas, Michalek, OP, Farmington Hills, Michigan

Good Morning. It is so good to be here. Being in your midst seems to be a dream and a good one at that! During my flight from Michigan I found myself asking, "What in the world are you doing, going to this Conference?" Loud and clear came the answer: "for the sake of the Preaching!" of course, which is why we are all here.

I want to thank Janet, most of all, for her persistence in getting me here and for all the work she has done to make this gathering a reality. Thank you, Janet. Some of you I know, most I do not but I hope that none of you are among those who know nothing of their sisters in the cloistered branch of the family. I would also like to thank and acknowledge Sr. Mary Magdalen of the Newark Monastery, who gave me invaluable historical information, which you will hear at the end of this talk. She, like Nona McGreal is an icon of Dominican Life, well lived. Thank you, Sister.

When I entered the Monastery some 50 odd years ago, we were classified as the "Second Order" of the Dominicans but that terminology is no longer used. We are the Nuns of the Order of Preachers, with you, part of the Dominican Family.

I'd like to capitalize on the notion of "family." One of the definitions given for family is "people descended from a common ancestor." We, nuns, are that common ancestor! And since this is a group of historians and archivists, let's go back to the history we're all familiar with. Around the year 1203 we find Dominic, only 33 years of age, sub prior of the church of Osma, asked to accompany his Bishop, Diego, as chaplain and companion on a mission to northern France to arrange a marriage, no less, between the son of King Alphonsus of Castile to a Danish Princess. The agreement being concluded, they return to give the news to the king who sends them again, this time to bring the young lady back. Upon arrival they are dismayed to learn that in the meantime she had died.

Dominic, by this time, is mesmerized by the great need he saw of catechizing the heretical sects who were rampant throughout central Europe. He was energized and saddened to see the great number of people who were adhering to their teachings of austerity and false doctrine and he longed to bring them back to the tenets of the true faith. He doesn't return to his position as a Canon at the Church of Osma but instead goes with Diego to Rome to ask the Pope to send both of them to the Cumins, that is, the pagans scattered throughout Europe. Bishop Diego also asks to be relieved of his Bishopric. The Pope refuses both requests. So they go back to France and there they meet up with a group of Cistercian Legates who have been working hard at trying to convert the heretics with little success. Dominic and the Bishop are asked their advice: give up all the pomp and fanfare that you surround yourselves with and approach these people on their own terms. Preach the Gospel as Jesus did: simply and without affectation. Identify with the poor. Show concern for them. Do all you can to save their souls; free them from fear; show them the beauty of all that God created; bring them to the truth.

Bishop Diego goes so far as to join the Cistercians while retaining his bishopric in Spain, but after some time he returns to his See. No sooner does he arrive there, sometime in 1207, when the Lord calls him to his eternal reward. In the meantime, the Cistercian Legates return to their monasteries as well. Dominic is left alone, but not idle. He has already attracted a number of women, converted from the ways and teachings of Albigensianism who come to him for guidance. What was he to do with them now that they recognized the

errors of their ways? He couldn't very well abandon them to the antagonism of their families. They had become fervent lovers of the Lord and thirsted, along with Dominic and the few male companions who remained with him to bring others to the truth. He prayed and he pondered.

So intense was his prayer that Our Lady herself intervened with a vision of a great ball of fire hovering in the sky right over the Church of St. Mary in Prouille. This happened three nights in a row. The "Seignadou," Sign of God. What did it mean? To Dominic there were no doubts: here he was to build a convent to house these women converts who had become silent partners in his work of evangelization. Bishop Fulk, the bishop of Toulouse, gladly ceded the Church and adjoining property to Brother Dominic as he was thereafter called. It was on November 22, 1206 that these ladies, now totally converted to the Lord, moved into the newly erected convent. A month later on December 27th, Dominic himself gave them the religious garb which to this day is worn by the Dominican Nuns throughout the world: a white tunic, black veil and cappa. Later to be added was the white Scapular given by Our Lady to Blessed Reginald to be worn by Friars and Nuns alike.

From the very beginning St. Mary's of Prouille came to be known as the "House of Holy Preaching". It became the headquarters of the men who had joined Dominic in his preaching efforts: the women doing their part, the men theirs, both sharing in the great Mission envisioned by Dominic: to bring back to Christ the thousands caught in the errors of the time. The salvation of souls was paramount and Dominic knew that divine grace was needed to convert even one of them; hence, the role of the Nuns. By their prayer and sacrifices they would implore the Almighty for the power and grace that alone could make the words of the preachers efficacious in the lives of those to whom the Friars would be sent. That in a nutshell explains 'who we are' and 'why we are', historically speaking. We are like the blood flowing through the veins of the entire Order. Therese of Lisieux would say of herself and her sisters that they were the Heart of the Church. I firmly believe that we are, too but with a slant to our own Dominican Mission.

The Fundamental Constitutions of the Nuns, promulgated in 1987, put all of the above in more contemporary terms and at the same time insert us into the framework of the entire Order, stating: "The friars, sisters and laity of the Order are 'to preach the name of the Lord Jesus Christ throughout the world;' the nuns are to seek, ponder and call upon him in solitude so that the word proceeding from the mouth of God may not return to him empty, but may accomplish those things for which it was sent (Cf. Is 55:10)." Partners in Preaching . . . silently but powerfully.

Yes, collaboration at its deepest is our "prayer of life", (notice that I didn't say "life of prayer") joined with yours and identified with yours in the manifold ways you fulfill the mission of the Order. One of the striking paradoxes of monastic life is that withdrawal from the world brings about a deeper communion with all of God's people. With Dominic, we too, cry out, "What will become of sinners?" . . . the poor? . . . the marginalized? . . . the oppressed and the oppressors? How do our lives, as cloistered nuns, touch these people? One nun put it this way: "We go into the desert, the cloister, not for peace and quiet for its own sake nor to escape the burdens and responsibilities of our brothers and sisters in the world, but to face head on, the struggle common to all followers of Christ against the effects of sin"—and I might add, injustice. Ours is not a "Jesus and me" spirituality, but a "Jesus for all" spirituality.

At the heart of our life is the "solemn celebration of the Liturgy." Day in and day out we stand before the Lord chanting His praises and voicing the distress of humankind as portrayed in the psalms. The joys, the sorrows, the loss of faith and trust, discouragement, the sense of being abandoned by God—all of these sentiments are included in the psalms. And this prayer is rooted in the belief that living for God alone, as our Constitutions bid us, engaging in the head on battle with our own demons will make a difference in the world. As the life is lived year after year we find that we are more and more given over to this cry for mercy: for ourselves and for each and every member of the human family. This "world" from which we have radically withdrawn but at

whose center we remain and whose pain we hold up to the Lord for mercy and relief. As Evagrius said: “A nun/monk is one who is separated from all and united to all.”

The Constitutions of the Nuns (LCM) quite succinctly captures the whole concept of our role in the Mission of the Order. LCM 96.I. states: “The brethren of the Order, ‘commissioned entirely for spreading abroad the word of God,’ fulfill their vocation primarily by preaching. The nuns, while commissioned by God primarily for prayer, are not for that reason excluded from the ministry of the word (cf. Venite Seorsum, V). For they listen to the word, celebrate it and keep it in their hearts (cf. Lk. 2:18,), and in this way proclaim the Gospel of God by the example of their life.”

It further says: “The purpose of all regular observance, especially enclosure and silence, is that the word of God may dwell abundantly in the monastery. Therefore, the nuns, after the example of the Precursor, should prepare the way of the Lord in the desert by the witness of their prayer and penance.” (LCM 96. II)

Our very buildings preach. They proclaim to all who pass by that God exists; that a group of women believe in God so deeply that they dedicate their whole lives to praise and intercession by day and by night for the suffering of the world and those who have lost all meaning and hope in life. By their constant pondering of His Word in Sacred Scriptures, their concern for the salvation of souls, by some hidden way of diffusion, connects with the fire burning in the hearts of the Friars as they go out and preach to a world weary of materialism and longing for “what they know not”.

I could go on and on listing and elaborating on the ways we nuns preach: the witness of our joy, by our community life, by our welcoming of guests, by our listening and responding to those who come to us in distress, whether in person, by phone, by letter or e-mail, by our public chanting of the Office, by our study of Sacred Truth in the quiet of the cloister often leading to the articles, books and poetry some among us write, by our praying of the Rosary together and with the faithful, by our often beautiful and ordered Liturgies, by our wearing of the Dominican Habit, by our witness to the importance and efficacy of prayer in everyday life. (Cf. Survey on the Dominican Charism of Preaching, Santa Sabina, July 2006)

The words of Fr. Anicetus Fernandez, OP, Master of the Order, in his presentation of our new Constitutions in 1971, sum it all up quite succinctly. He wrote: “Hence, the contemplative life of the nuns is of the greatest benefit to the apostolate of the Order, not only because, like other contemplatives, they offer their prayers and their life to God on behalf of the apostolic needs of the Church, but also because their contemplation and their life, inasmuch as they are truly and properly Dominican, are from the beginning and by their very nature ordered to the apostolate which the Dominican Family exercises as a whole and in which the fullness of the Dominican vocation is to be found.”

Janet thought it would be good to give a brief rundown of the history of the Dominican Nuns in the United States. Many of our brothers and sisters are not even aware of our presence let alone of our history! It all began with two American women from New York, Julia Crooks and her niece, Virginia Noel, who desirous of the contemplative life entered the Dominican Monastery of Oullins in France to receive their formation as Dominican Nuns. Their goal was to bring Cloistered Dominican Life back to the United States. They were given the names: Sister Mary of Jesus, the aunt and her niece, Sister Mary Emmanuel who was later to be the foundress of our Detroit Monastery. In 1880 Bishop Michael A. Corrigan formally invited these two nuns to make a foundation in his Diocese of Newark, New Jersey. They were joined by Sister Maria Dominica and Sister Mary of Mercy, still a novice. On June 24, 1880 the feast of St. John the Baptist, the four pioneers left Oullins for America. The beginning had begun!

One month later, on the 26th of July the sisters moved into the house on Sussex Street which was to be their

temporary dwelling and cradle of their practice of Perpetual Adoration. Within four years they were able to build a large, permanent Monastery on 13th Avenue. April 3, 1884 saw the little band, now grown to fourteen Nuns, move once and for all into their “promised land” of their very own Dominican Monastery of Cloistered Nuns, The Monastery of Saint Dominic.

After only nine years this proto monastery of Dominican Nuns in the United States was sufficiently established to be in a position to make its first foundation, again under the auspices of Archbishop Corrigan, who had been transferred from Newark to the See of New York. Hunt’s Point, now known as the Bronx, was the chosen destination for two of the original foundresses, plus four other professed nuns who completed the group. A new monastery was being built there, larger than Newark’s, but modeled on similar architectural style. It was on December 3, 1889 that the sisters moved into this new building: Corpus Christi Monastery.

The Newark community continued to grow until 1906 when yet another foundation was deemed possible and desirable. After writing to several Bishops, the Bishop of Detroit, Bishop John S. Foley agreed to welcome the nuns into his diocese, sight unseen but with the promise from them, to introduce and maintain Perpetual Adoration in the Diocese. So it was that on April 1, 1906 Mother Mary Emmanuel, along with six sisters left Newark for Detroit to found the Monastery of the Blessed Sacrament. Two years later they were able to move into their permanent building on Oakland Avenue where they stayed until 1966 when they moved to a new location and a brand new Monastery in Farmington Hills, Michigan. We are still happily there and flourishing. The Newark Monastery was unhappily closed in 2004 due to lack of vocations and considerable deterioration of the locality. Thankfully six of the Newark Nuns have joined us in Farmington Hills.

There were subsequently two more foundations made from Newark. One in Cincinnati in 1915 and Los Angeles in 1924. Our own Farmington Hills Monastery sponsored two new foundations as well. The first in Squamish, British Columbia begun in 1999 with the collaboration of a number of other Monasteries in the States, Queen of Peace Monastery which received their autonomy and recognition from the Holy See in 2009. The sisters are about to dedicate their newly built Monastery this coming August 8th on the Solemnity of St. Dominic. The other is a foundation in Vietnam which is still under our auspices, mainly because their (communist) government will not allow them to build their own Monastery. They are doing very well but stymied in their desire for a permanent monastic structure. I would ask you all to keep them in prayer. Vocations there are almost too numerous to keep up with.

In addition to these, four other foundations have been made by the American Nuns; one in Kenya, founded by Our Lady of Grace Monastery in North Guilford, CT; one in Pakistan by the Monastery of the Angeles in Los Angeles, CA and two in the Philippines—one founded by Our Lady of the Rosary Monastery in Summit, NJ and the other sponsored by the Los Angeles Monastery.

This account of the foundations of Dominican Monasteries in the United States is only half of the story. There was also another branch of Dominican Monastics: the “Perpetual Rosary Sisters.” They were founded by a French Dominican, Fr. Damien-Marie Saintourens, OP with the purpose of praying of the Rosary throughout the hours of the day and night. These sisters, too, lived the enclosed life. It was on December of 1891 that four of these sisters left Calais and arrived in this country on December 21st to found the first Monastery of Perpetual Rosary in West Hoboken, now Union City, New Jersey.

Here, some clarification might be useful. The Sisters of the Perpetual Rosary were originally established not as “nuns” in the strict canonical sense of the term: i.e., as making Solemn Vows, having Papal Enclosure and the obligation to the full daily choral recitation of the Divine Office. Fr. Santourens’ vision was rather that their status would be that of “Sisters of the Third Order–Enclosed.” Their life, in many ways similar to that of the Nuns of the Order, properly so called, had its own regulations modeled on the Constitutions of the Nuns but

with some mitigation of the more austere monastic observances. These were replaced by their obligation to the perpetual recitation of the Rosary.

However, in the years between 1920 and 1960, all but one of the monasteries of the Perpetual Rosary Branch in the USA took the necessary steps toward canonical incorporation as “Nuns of the Order” in the full canonical sense. Today, while there are a few monasteries of the “Sisters of the Third Order–Enclosed” scattered throughout the world, the Monastery of the Rosary in Milwaukee, WI is the only remaining one in the USA.

Now I would like to share briefly something of the development of the relationship of the Monasteries of Dominican Nuns in the United States among themselves. Historically, the Dominican Nuns of the USA have cherished their “autonomy”, seen as a means of insuring the solitude and privacy felt to be so essential to a life of contemplation. But with Vatican II and its beautiful document *Perfectae Caritatis*, followed by *Venite Secorsum* in 1969 things began to change.

The first occasion for the nuns’ “coming together” was at the invitation of the Provincial Promoter of the Nuns of Saint Joseph’s Province, Fr. William B. Ryan, OP. He had been requested by Master General Aniceto Fernandez to provide a nun from the USA to serve on the Commission of Friars and Nuns to sit in Rome for the revision of the Constitutions of the Nuns in April 1970. The gathering was held at the convent of the Elkins Park Dominican Sisters in Alexandria, Virginia. The group that responded to Fr. Ryan’s invitation was small but represented monasteries from all of the Provinces, and from thence the delegate for the Commission was chosen.

The nuns attending the gathering in 1969 had seen first-hand the value of their coming together to meet personally; something never experienced from the first foundation of the American Nuns in 1880. They shared with Fr. Ryan their desire to meet again. He responded by planning what he for a week in June, called a “Dominican Contemplative Study Week: which was held for a week in June, 1973 at the Motherhouse of the Dominican Sisters at Caldwell, NJ, where Fr. Ryan served as Chaplain. All the arrangements were made by Fr. Ryan himself, who provided for lectures by various Friars, some workshops by the Caldwell Sisters and amply opportunity for discussion among the nuns. A good number of them from all of the USA Monasteries participated.

The experience of their coming together for the Study Week in Caldwell was such a positive one that the nuns were not long in desiring its repetition. Fr. Ryan agreed to the idea of a “National Meeting” but wisely said that the nuns should arrange the meeting themselves. He suggested that a balloting be conducted to select five monasteries to take the lead. This was done. One of these monasteries was to be responsible for the over-all leadership and arrangements; the other four for presenting papers on various aspects of our life. This meeting, which was open to the Prioress and one delegate from every Monastery in the United States, was held at the Motherhouse of the Dominican Sisters of Springfield, IL in the early part of 1975.

Though united in spirit and ideals and wishing to collaborate more among themselves, the nuns were not in favor of establishing a Federation, as many of the European monasteries had done. They did not wish to be bound to a “legal” set up but still wanted some kind of an approved organization that would provide for their coming together for mutual help and enrichment. To make a long story short, after the approval of the Conventual Chapters of the individual monasteries, the Conference of the Dominican Nuns of the United States of America” came into existence on December 8, 1975, the date on which the official letter was sent to the monasteries to this effect. The name “Conference” was chosen at the suggestion of Fr. Ryan because of the similarity of its proposed operation to that of the Conference of Catholic Bishops in the USA.

It was comprised of 15 Monasteries in the States and 2 affiliates: one in Berthierville PQ, Canada and the other in the Port of Spain, Trinidad. Its purpose was to foster the monastic, contemplative life of the nuns by means of sisterly sharing that would foster study and intercommunication through various exchanges and programs to facilitate the spiritual, intellectual and cultural development of the nuns. It would also serve as an outreach and means of communication with the Friars and Sisters of the Order who were often called upon to give us lectures and courses.

The Conference had rounded out 25 years of its existence when in the year 2000 in response to a routine letter requesting a permission called for by *Venite Seorsum*, the Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life wrote back to the President advising that the members consider changing either to a Federation or an Association, both needing approval of the said Congregation. Up to this time we functioned under the auspices of the Master General. All said and done, the Nuns did not favor Federation, so opted for an "Association." New By-laws were drawn up and the member monastery Chapters were again asked to vote if they wished to join this new entity. Most opted to join; some did not. However, this did not dampen the unity among us and we continue to collaborate as we shall most certainly do in our coming Second General Assembly of the Association in September, when all of the Monasteries will be represented. Our new Master General, Fr. Bruno Cadore, OP will honor us with his presence. Do pray for its success in terms of an overflowing of the spirit of Dominic upon us all as we venture on into the beginnings of this 21st Century.

Thank you.