

## IN OUR KEEPING

Dominican University, River Forest Illinois, June 2008  
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*Lord Jesus, Word of God, eternal Son of the Father, who out of love for mankind desired to enter into our history, permit us to contemplate with you the stages of our pilgrimage on this earth. Give us your Spirit that we may search always for what is true, without prejudice or preconception, to study it with fervour and to explain it with humility, in full knowledge of the limitations of our understanding of that great book, that derives its meaning from you alone, who lives and reigns with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.* The Historian's Prayer, Guy BEDOUELLE op<sup>1</sup>

My aim in this talk is simply to offer you a few pointers to some paths down which you might like to let your thoughts wander, for history should be a reflective process rather than the memorisation of facts and dates.

The title of this conference “In Our Keeping” has echoes of that ancient scriptural text that concludes the first part of the book of Deuteronomy: “Consign my words to your heart, wear them on your forehead like a bandana. Teach them to your sons, and repeat them to them, whether you are sitting in your house or walking along the road.”<sup>2</sup> When God made the first covenant with Israel, an essential part of this holy alliance was its transmission from one generation to the next. This transmission of tradition, is at the heart of the religious experience of the sons of Israel, and it needs to be at the heart of the life of our religious Order, for are we not covenanted to St Dominic in a similar manner?

Such a responsibility for handing on tradition means far more than simply being the person who holds a bunch of keys and locks up old papers in boxes, or even the person who writes history books. On the contrary, the transmission of tradition is a dynamic in which all members of the family—all the sons and daughters from generation to generation—need to be involved. And rather than locking up papers, the archivist and the historian are the key figures who can unlock the past for us, facilitating access to the history and tradition of the religious family to which we belong, so that all members may assume fully the identity which it is theirs to take on and possess.

I'd like to give just one little concrete example of what is at stake here. At the S.H.O.P. project headquarters,<sup>3</sup> we are currently working on transcribing and preparing for publication the life of Mère Marguerite de Jésus de Senaux, the 17<sup>th</sup> century foundress of the first two Dominican monasteries in Paris, a significant landmark in the history of the Order.<sup>4</sup> Yet this biography and the spiritual writings also contained in the same volume have never been published. The manuscript, which is over five hundred pages long and dates from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It has recently come into the possession of the Dominican nuns at Evry near Paris. Where has it been all this time, one might ask? It was donated to these nuns by a person who bought it—literally—on the Paris flea market and that for the sake of the handsome leather binding, just to have something to look good on the bookshelves. It was only later that this person realised what the book was, and that it would be of great interest to present day Dominican sisters. The first clue was the fact that the book had a label inside saying “Dominicaines, Nancy”. The Dominican sisters of Nancy were a teaching congregation, founded in the 1850's, and they had obviously had this manuscript in their possession at some point. Subsequently they merged with other

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<sup>1</sup>BEDOUELLE Guy, *L'histoire de l'Eglise*, Paris, Cerf, 1997, p.283.

<sup>2</sup>Deuteronomy, 11; 18-19.

<sup>3</sup>The S.H.O.P. Association (Sister Historians of the Order of Preachers) is based at Fanjeaux, France and is dedicated to the history of Dominican women, by means of the creation of an international library and research facility.

<sup>4</sup>The Monastère Saint-Thomas, founded in 1627 and the Monastère de la Croix, founded in 1636. Although the community has experienced several expulsions and periods of exile due to political events, and although the original buildings have been demolished, the community of Dominican nuns currently living at Evry near Paris is in direct line of descent from the Monastère de la Croix.

congregations, and some convents were closed. In a general process of clearing out, this book had obviously just been disposed of, and ended up on the flea market... One wonders how many other treasures have disappeared without trace over the years. To have such things “In Our Keeping” is indeed a responsibility.

Cardinal Georges Cottier, the Swiss Dominican who was for many years theologian of the pontifical household wrote on the eve of the third millennium: “The way we look at the past, the way in which we take it on board is part of the dynamic of the present. History gives out lessons that we must receive.”<sup>5</sup> And Léo Moulin, a rather more radical Belgian historian has stated quite simply: “If you don’t feel rooted in your past, then you have no present.”<sup>6</sup>

But if we are honest, we have to admit that history is not the most popular of subjects – we can all remember being bored in school with lists of dates of battles or the names of the kings of England to learn. But that is not the kind of history we are talking about here. We are more concerned with questions of memory and of identity. Modern psychological studies tell us that these are key concepts for the well-being of the human person. People who lose their memory are classified as being dysfunctional or mentally ill. In order to function well in society, it is indeed necessary to have a sense of one’s own identity. And history is nothing more than the expression of a collective memory, and as such contributes to the creation of a collective identity for the group of people whose history is studied.

People who make a commitment to a religious Order acquire an extra dimension to their own personal identity and memory, for they acquire a share in a collective identity as a member of the religious family—in our case the Dominican family—in which they make their profession. In this way, they take on a role in its collective history, thus Dominican history is not an “optional extra”: we are part of it, whether we like it or not! If I take myself as an example: I can no longer be identified just as a British subject born in the city of Coventry in 1946, but also as a Dominican sister who made profession in the Order in such and such a monastery on such and such a date. This extra collective dimension adds something to my personal identity, and in order to enter into it fully, I need to acquire something of my religious Order’s collective memory. I can achieve that by studying its history.

Our approach to history needs to be serious and scientific; otherwise we are likely to end up in the domain of mythology and romanticism. It is indeed possible to imagine all kinds of things about how the first Dominican friars and nuns lived in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century; we can project our own image, an image that conforms to how we would like our Dominican forebears to be. And throughout the ages, successive generations have tended to do just that. But what we need to know is how Dominic and the first generations of the Order really lived, and, more importantly, what we can deduce about the kind of future St Dominic envisaged for them. When a religious Order is founded, it is, by the very nature of things, a long-term undertaking, and in this respect, the Dominican Order has been notably and exceptionally successful. Many religious Orders founded in the Middle Ages disappeared after a century or two. To have survived for eight hundred years undoubtedly has something to do with the solidity of the institutions that Dominic set up for the government of the Order. And so even studying the history of constitutions, which *a priori* sounds rather boring, has to be relevant to our identity today.

A Jewish philosopher, Catherine Chalièr recently published a book called, in French of course, *Transmitting from generation to generation* which is very relevant to our subject.<sup>7</sup> The vocabulary she uses for the stages of the process of transmission of tradition is useful for us also:

1. **Narration**—we have to tell the tale.
2. **Explanation and demonstration**—we must ensure that the tale has been received and understood.

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<sup>5</sup>Georges COTTIER, *Mémoire et repentance*, Paris, Parole et Silence, 1999, p.16.

<sup>6</sup>Léo MOULIN, *L’identité dominicaine d’après l’histoire*, Libramont, 1986, p.7.

<sup>7</sup>Catherine CHALIÈR, *Transmettre de génération en génération*, Paris, Buchet Chastel, 2008

3. **Information**—further development in communication, but we need to grasp the full sense of this stage, for transmission is more than the simple handing on of facts, yet it needs to stop short of indoctrination.
4. **Witnessing**—those who transmit the tradition must also live by the same values.

Bearing in mind the significance of these concepts, to study the history of the Order is in a very real sense to become more deeply rooted in our Dominican identity and hence more effective in the Order's preaching mission, for indeed we are identified as preachers. So in a way that might seem paradoxical at first, the study of the past is also the preparation of the future, because as in any journey, you need to know where you have come from, in order to see where you are going. When buying a ticket for a journey, it is not enough just to state the destination, the point of departure is equally important. Just as a young person who grows up having no idea who his parents are, what his origins are, is likely to be in some sense unbalanced or unfulfilled, so a Dominican who has no point of contact with the Dominican past, would have difficulty in living a Dominican present to the full. And it is not simply a question of what one might call the "novitiate syndrome." I guess we can all remember getting as answer to the enquiry: "Why do we do things this way" the response "Because that's the way we've always done it". This is not authentic history! It is rather a failure to understand the issues involved. Tradition and respect for the past cannot exist in the void; they have to be rooted in something that we can still identify with today.

All of us, even enclosed nuns, are affected by the secular society in which we live; we are obliged to interact with it. This has always been the case. For example, in 1792, over a thousand French Dominican nuns were forcibly expelled by revolutionaries from the fifty-two monasteries that existed in France at that time. A century and a half later, and so within living memory for us, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia expelled the Dominican nuns from their monastery and sent them to special labour camps. History does indeed repeat itself. And if you know that what is happening to you already happened to others, that they survived the ordeal, that they picked themselves up and in due course founded new monasteries and continued with their Dominican life, this can be a great source of inner strength. And what did those Czech nuns do in the labour camps in the 1950s and 60's? They set up a secret printing press and wrote Dominican history! And after the fall of Communism they founded a new monastery in Znojmo, in the south of what is now the Czech Republic. This community is flourishing and has recruited young sisters. And so it becomes clear that we are all part of something that is by its very nature cyclical, and we need to be able to situate ourselves and to function within the cycle in which it falls to us to live. For "To be ignorant of our history is to be ignorant of who we are."<sup>8</sup>

At this point in our reflection, it is possibly a good idea to consider how globalisation affects the work of the Dominican historian. Often globalisation is presented in rather a negative light, but I think that for historical scholarship it provides a number of useful tools.

- i) The speed of communication: it is that much easier to be aware of what other scholars are doing, and thus to have a more overall view of the life of the Order.
- ii) The accessibility of manuscripts. One used to have to travel great distances to work with manuscripts, but now in the days of digital photography, which does not damage the originals, copies can be made and sent by CDROM or simply down the line. For example, Simon Tugwell works on early documents concerning Prouilhe without leaving Rome, by means of digital copies made by the Archives Départementales in Carcassonne, France.
- iii) The easy accessibility of the tools of the historian's trade on Internet. The publication of bibliographies, encyclopaedias, photographic archives on line has really transformed the way we work.

Personally I would rate globalisation on the plus side as far as intellectual research is concerned, but there are of course still many handicaps that the historian of religious life comes up against. Two that spring to

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<sup>8</sup>Fr Marie-Bernard Nielly op, provincial of Lyons, 1966, in an address to the Dominican family.

mind are historical chauvinism and individualism. In fact they are related, and are features of contemporary society in general, and not just of the Dominican Order.

**Historical chauvinism:** this is the temptation is to limit our study of history to taking into account what happened in our own backyard. This is obvious from the way the dates of wars are given. In England, the Second World War is given as lasting from 1939-1945; in France it is over by 1941, when the Vichy government was set up, and similarly in the USA its beginning is dated from American involvement after Pearl Harbour, but naturally enough, from this perspective it does not end with victory in Europe, but carries on until the end of the war in the Pacific.

Our schoolchildren rarely get anything resembling an overview of history these days. In a religious Order like ours, which is both very old and very international (this aspect is even of the very essence of its being, I would say) we owe it to ourselves to take as global a view as possible. Our generation is fortunate in being the first to be able to benefit from that amazing tool that is the Internet, for this enables us to gain relatively effortlessly a view of horizons other than our own in a way that would have been unimaginable even twenty years ago. This is especially valuable for enclosed nuns, who have a much greater access to the global scene thanks to the Internet; even octogenarian sisters learn to surf relatively easily.

**Individualism:** there is fairly general agreement that this is one of the great scourges of our times, and one of its consequences is to consider history as irrelevant. If the world revolves around me, what need have I to take into account what happened to other people before I was born? A French Dominican historian told me that these days he experiences great difficulty in getting young friars interested in the history of the Order, for, as he said somewhat cynically, they seem to have the impression that “Nothing of note existed before they came on the scene”.

At this point I would like to share with you something of the process that led me to approach the history of the beginnings of Dominican community life in the way that I do.<sup>9</sup>

The first significant influence on my thinking was the writings of the French Jesuit philosopher, **Michel de Certeau**, and in particular two books that are also available in English translation: *The Mystic Fable* and *The Writing of History*.<sup>10</sup> De Certeau alerted me to the difficulties inherent in any attempt to study history in general and religious history in particular, for this Jesuit has a challenging way of looking at the question. He writes about the mythology that often surrounds the origins of religious ventures, and the way in which the present is by the very nature of things a form of heresy vis-à-vis the past. What does he mean by these enigmatic terms? I summarise the dilemma as he presents it in *the Mystic Fable*, only I have substituted the word Dominican for Jesuit. “In order to still call ourselves Dominican, is it not necessary to look at the present through the eyes of a tradition, to live within the framework of institutions set up eight centuries ago? Yet, because we are of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is it not inevitable that we consider this past to be an alien world?”<sup>11</sup>

On the one hand, we are trying to identify with the past, in the sense that we seek to discern from it what our Dominican spirit today should be, and at the same time, we are identifying with our contemporaries in order to determine what our activities as human beings, Christians and Dominicans should be. We speak the language of our times, we share in its mentality, and we are actors in the modern world even when we return to our tradition. Thus we find ourselves in a rather complex situation, poised between the heritage of the past and the demands of the present, needing at one and the same time to contemplate both our present situation and our history. This is one of the tensions inherent in religious life. We hope that we are going to be able to distinguish between what is dead and what is still alive in our tradition. We think that we will be able to eliminate from the treasure that we have inherited those items that are “past their sell by date” so to speak. But in reality, when we do that, we are operating a selective process; we are

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<sup>9</sup>For further background information on this point see Barbara BEAUMONT, “Catching fire from Dominic’s vision: The Coming of the Preachers” in *Religious Life Review*, n° 241, Dublin, November/December 2006, pp. 337-355.

<sup>10</sup>Michel de CERTEAU, *La Fable mystique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1982 and *La faiblesse de croire*, Paris, Seuil, 1987.

<sup>11</sup>De Certeau, *op.cit.*, Chapter 3, p.53.

passing judgement, rejecting some aspects and choosing others. This is the business of discernment, for which the guidance of the Holy Spirit is indispensable.

Feeling that we have new and urgent needs, we set about reorganising the past. I am not just pointing the finger at 21<sup>st</sup> century Dominicans, but this process of selectivity has operated in every age, for each succeeding generation reads history through its own particular socio-cultural distorting mirror. We are probably no better nor worse than any other previous generation. To quote Michel de Certeau once more: “Every present creates its own *Imago primi saeculi* (that is, its own image of what the earliest times of the Order were like). Each succeeding generation claims to have discovered at last the “true spirit” (he says of Ignatius, but we can just as well substitute Dominic). And he asks: “Where are these enchanted sources?” he warns against treating history as a sort of treasure hunt, for such sources as these we will never find – they are but a mirage.<sup>12</sup>

For us Dominicans, it is at one and the same time a handicap and a source of grace that we have virtually nothing written by the hand St Dominic himself. This makes great demands on us when it comes to discerning our founder’s mind on any particular subject, but it also leaves us free to innovate. The Benedictines have the rule of St Benedict. They have never changed it – how could they? But it is not reasonable to live by it today to the letter, as St Benedict wrote it. For example it would seem inappropriate to organise the liturgy to be all completed between sunrise and sunset, as recommended by St Benedict, now that we light our chapels with electricity. Likewise, it would seem inappropriate to wear clothing made exclusively of wool, now that other fibres are available to us. The Jesuits have the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius – how could they change anything in them? We have no equivalent, thus we are free to adapt and update our teaching on prayer.

In a very real sense we can consider the Constitutions of the Order to be the work of St Dominic, although he was probably not the sole author. But Constitutions are not something fixed for all time – they are a practical guide to how to live the rule, and our rule is that of St Augustine. This rule has the distinct advantage of underlining the values to be lived out by religious in community, whilst not regulating the details of everyday life for these same religious. Dominican constitutions were never intended to be fixed for all time. Our system of General Chapters was put in place specifically for the purpose of revising and updating the constitutions.

One of the few things we do possess from the pen of St Dominic is the letter he wrote to the nuns of Madrid in 1220. In this text, as well as in the rule of the monastery of San Sisto (which was at least inspired by Dominic), one of the most striking things is the number of things that Dominic leaves to the discretion of the prioress. He personally did not seek to impose things, and it is very notable that in early deeds concerning Prouilhe, where Dominic is mentioned, it is always with the qualification that he was acting as the representative of the prioress. He is never referred to as prior in the documents concerning the community of sisters at Prouilhe.

He was a man who responded to the needs of the moment; this is patently obvious in his preaching to the Cathars, and in his founding of the monastery at Prouilhe. There were urgent situations to be dealt with, and if we are to be faithful to his spirit, this is how we should act too. That is: don’t start a new venture by first sitting down and writing a book of rules. Not that we should all do as we please, but rather those in authority should discern what is most appropriate for the group, and the writing down will come in due course. These are the kind of lessons concerning general principles that we *can* learn from our history, but, on the contrary, we should not expect to find out at exactly what hour St Dominic expects us to sing vespers every day.

We need to be conscious of what makes us distinctive as Dominicans, and this understanding will be greatly enhanced by a study of our history. We should value the differences that mark us out from other Orders, for these are what motivate us, and on the contrary, uniformity is a great force for inertia.

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 55-57.

Although it is undoubtedly administratively convenient, there has been, in the twentieth century, a tendency on the part of the Vatican to seek to “standardise” religious life, particularly that of monastic women. Yet religious Orders were born out of the intuition of a charismatic person, who is, by definition, someone extra-ordinary.

To come now to the second major influence on my reading of Dominican history: that is the lessons to be learnt from the French Revolution and the Dominican restoration of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> And indeed this period is sufficiently close for us still to be very much under its influence, in ways that we may not even suspect. This is of particular significance in North America, for it was then that the foundations of Dominican life were laid down here. It quickly becomes evident to the student of Dominican history, that the 19<sup>th</sup> century had a very particular way of looking at things, and no to put too fine a point on it, it reinvented a view of the early history of the Order to suit its own purposes. Thus we need to ask what these purposes might have been, and how such a thing came about.

I am taking France as a prime example, because its influence was considerable at this time: the French Revolution of 1789 and its Napoleonic aftermath effectively put an end to institutional Dominican life in a considerable part of Europe. The friars were disbanded, unable to function as priests, and the nuns were thrown out of their monasteries, and most were obliged to return to their families. Conventual buildings were sold off and some were demolished. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, things had calmed down and if the socio-political climate was not exactly welcoming, it was at least less hostile to religious life, and so it became possible to make a new start.

The Dominican Order was restored at this time by two Frenchmen who left a lasting imprint: Fr Henri-Dominique Lacordaire,<sup>14</sup> originally a diocesan priest who made profession as a Dominican in Italy in 1840, did noble and pioneering work. He was subsequently rather overshadowed by his former novice Fr Alexandre Vincent Jandel,<sup>15</sup> who became Master of the Order from 1850-1872. And it should not be forgotten that the Dominican monasteries of North America were founded from France; as far as the Congregations of sisters are concerned, many came from a German branch, where similar influences had been at work.

But what kind of a new start was made in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century? How did this new generation of religious interpret the events of the recent past?

The Revolution was seen by many Catholics as a punishment from God, quite simply as an expression of divine anger. Viewed in this light, the expulsion of nuns, monks and friars from their convents was interpreted as retribution for their not having kept up the observances faithfully. (This is of very dubious veracity, as there is no reason to believe that a majority of religious in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were any less sincere in their vocation than preceding generations.) Thus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century restoration of religious life, these observances became a key concept; the new generation must be extra observant, in order to avoid arousing the wrath of God again.

Phrases such as “Let us restore the monument of observance” and “the resurrection of observances” are commonplace.<sup>16</sup> Such language suggests a rather archaeological approach, seeking to restore religious life in the same way as one would restore a ruined building. But it is simply not possible for human beings to reproduce in entirety a past age, for we are obliged to take into account the fact that time and the world have moved on. If we want to be relevant to our world, we cannot be content to live in a museum. That

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<sup>13</sup>These discoveries I made whilst working on my doctoral thesis, published as: Barbara Estelle BEAUMONT, *La Restauration des monastères de dominicaines en France après la Révolution*, in the collection *Disertationes Historicae* XXVII, Istituto Domenicano, Rome, 2002, 352 p.

<sup>14</sup>1802-1861

<sup>15</sup>1810-1872

<sup>16</sup> For example in Ambroise-Marie POTTON’s commentary on the Constitutions of Dominican nuns in *Constitutions des sœurs dominicaines du second ordre*, Paris, Poussielgue, 1864, p.3 *et seq.* (N.B. This same Fr Potton is responsible for the erroneous title “Second Order” as applied to enclosed nuns of the Order of Preachers. There is no historical precedent or justification for this, yet it has proved very tenacious.)

is not what fidelity to tradition means. Those Czech sisters mentioned earlier, who were imprisoned by the communists for forty years, were by no means able to pick up where they had left off. Their buildings were gone, new constitutions had been written, society had moved on, and they now find themselves sharing a convent with Dominican friars, that would probably have been unthinkable in the 1940's.

To return to the 19<sup>th</sup> century however, observances took on an exaggerated importance. Essentially these reflect the attention paid to detail in the everyday life of a religious community. Indeed it is possible for these matters to assume such a great significance that spiritual life becomes stifled by considerations such as how to hold the scapular when bowing, and how deeply to bow in various circumstances,<sup>17</sup> and this to the extent that one loses sight of what is actually going on in choir. The danger is quite simply that of Phariseism.

As we have already said, St Dominic himself did not fix any observances or timetables: these were left to local discernment. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century however, French provincials sought to standardise everything down to the last detail. There is a little booklet entitled *Dominican religious life in the province of Lyon* written at this time with the specific purpose of attracting candidates to the novitiate. It is very interesting to see how Dominican life is presented to the prospective candidate: the aspects that the author stresses are “asceticism and apostolate”. Today I think we are surprised that he puts asceticism first, and that he tells us, that in St Dominic’s view, the Dominican should be “an ascetic above all else”, and, he continues: “Dominican asceticism is characterised by the fact that it is more severe than all others”. One can read through this booklet from cover to cover and find no mention of contemplation being part of the Dominican tradition.

This same author has little to say about Dominican nuns, but what he does say is equally curious. “Their life, he writes, is much the same as that of other nuns, Benedictines or Carthusians for example. But they benefit from certain particularities of Dominican liturgy.” To reduce the specificity of Dominican nuns to a question of liturgical detail is to say the least, unfortunate. But here we see in action a selective approach to the writing of Dominican history, and such writings can function like the distorting mirrors found at fairgrounds.

I could take another example from the monastery of nuns at Mauléon, France, which was extremely influential in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The foundress of the Perpetual Rosary Dominicans came from this monastery and so the influence was transatlantic also. These sisters wrote about being “dazzled by the brilliant lily of primitive observance.” In this community several young sisters died in a form of holy suicide, from an excess of penitential practices: fasting and mortification of the flesh, that today we would probably call *anorexia nervosa*. These young sisters were perfectly convinced that they were being faithful to the Dominican charism.<sup>18</sup> It is possible for us to see now that they were not, but this is because we take the trouble to look closely at what early Dominican life was really like. We have the possibility, nay the duty and the obligation to read early documents. These 19<sup>th</sup> century sisters did not have much access to books and study: for example I was amazed to discover that the *Libellus* of Jordan of Saxony was not translated into French until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most nuns would have been incapable of reading it in Latin, even if they were able to get hold of a copy.

All of this becomes easier to understand when one realises that another key aspect of 19<sup>th</sup> century spirituality was the concept of reparation. This is essentially a backward looking stance—by an act of reparation one seeks to make amends for something that happened in the past, for events that are over and done with and over which one has no control. It was in this spirit that the practices of perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and perpetual recitation of the rosary came to be popular. Indeed these devotions came to characterise Dominican monastic life in the United States, and to some extent, they still do. But there is absolutely no mention of these practices in the Dominican legislative tradition for nuns, and as far as we can tell, they did not figure largely in the life of Dominican monasteries before

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<sup>17</sup> See Potton, *op.cit.*, p.117. (In all, thirty pages are devoted to the art of bowing!).

<sup>18</sup> See *Un Cloître dominicain – histoire de la fondation du monastère des dominicaines de Mauléon*, par une religieuse du même monastère, Gent, Veritas, 1922, pp.52-59.

the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I am by no means saying that these are not good practices, leading to the sanctification of the nuns and their prayer during these devotions surely bears fruit for the life of the Order, but the hard fact is that they are not part of Dominican monastic tradition before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Here mention must be made of the monastery at Oullins, near Lyons in France, from where the first Dominican monastery in North America was founded at Newark NJ in 1880. The situation was quite simply this: fine new monastic buildings had been built at Oullins at the expense of a local Countess who offered them to any religious Order that would take on perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. These buildings were accepted by the Dominican provincial of Lyons, who persuaded the nuns of Chinon to make a foundation there in 1868, and to accept the countess's condition with regard to perpetual adoration. So it was in fact much more a question of historical accident than of Dominican tradition. This is the kind of situation we need to be aware of, in order not to confuse tradition and expediency.

Thus we see the necessity for history to be clearly written down, for if this story of the countess and the provincial had not been recorded, and from simply looking at what Dominican monastic life in the USA subsequently became, one might quite easily think that perpetual adoration was part of Dominican tradition from time immemorial. The same applies of course to the perpetual rosary. It is wonderful for the nuns to have these devotions, but what I'm saying is that they are not a *sine qua non* of monastic life in the Order of Preachers.

It would seem that so far I have been drawing attention rather to the pitfalls inherent in the study of the past. It would be time now to look at ways in which such risks can be minimised, even if achieving 100% accuracy and objectivity in history is an impossibility, given that we are dealing with a "human science" and not an "exact science", as the French put it.

In the light of all this, what hope is there for communicating effectively with our Dominican past? A little light can be shed on this by the following example. During the process of collaborating with Fr Simon Tugwell in the preparation of a text for publication, it became obvious to me that he knows the 13<sup>th</sup> century virtually half hour by half hour. For example, he would instantly be able to correct a date wrongly given as, say, 17<sup>th</sup> February 1207 to the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup>. I began to realise the value of this detailed knowledge. Not everyone is capable of such scholarship as Fr Tugwell, but each generation surely needs somebody like him, who is given the training and the time for this kind of study. It is this exhaustive and minute research based on the study of contemporary documents that enables the historian to draw conclusions – or infer probabilities – that would not otherwise be possible.

In a very real way, Fr Simon Tugwell's brand of scholarship contributes to our understanding of the life of St Dominic and hence of our history and tradition. There are two articles by him that spring to mind in this connection, as they are typical of this "forensic" style of research. One of them tries to answer the question: "Where was St Dominic between 1207 and 1211?" and the other "For whom was the monastery of Prouilhe founded?"<sup>19</sup> These are really fundamental questions that had never been adequately researched before. Both of these articles are incredibly well-documented, with the footnotes occupying almost as much space as the text, and with several appendices of supporting material. It can seem daunting at first, but perseverance brings its reward.

I recently had a visit from a German friar, an eminent man, a former provincial, who was rather upset that Jordan of Saxony's account of Dominic remaining at Prouilhe/ Fanjeaux all the time between the foundation of the monastery at Prouilhe in 1206 and the foundation of the Order in 1215, in solitude and faced with a certain sense of failure was now being challenged, in favour of the proposition that Dominic most likely returned to Spain after the death of Bishop Diego in 1207 and in all probability remained there for several years. I tried to convince him over a cup of tea, but he was reluctant to give up the traditional interpretation, and so I lent him a copy of Simon Tugwell's article to read. When he

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<sup>19</sup>Simon TUGWELL, "Notes on the Life of St Dominic" and "For whom was Prouille founded?" in *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, Rome, vol. LXXIII, p.5-141 and vol. LXXIV, 2004, pp.5-125.

handed it back to me the following day, he said “I’m convinced now, faced with that amount of detailed evidence, there is nothing more to say.”

This scientific approach to the writing of history typically begins with a question – i.e. the onus is on the investigation, the author is not seeking at the outset to prove one thing or another, but simply to find out what was going on. This approach favoured by Simon Tugwell underlines the important distinction between history and ideology, for it is relatively easy to make history say what you want it to say. But the investigative kind of history is only possible if sufficient quantities of documents have been conserved. And so we come back to the role of the archivist, and the importance of having plenty of materials safely “in our keeping...”

It is interesting to note that as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, St Thomas Aquinas had something of this more scientific approach to history that relies on a greater volume of documentation. Obviously he is not known first and foremost in this role, but a leading Thomist, has described St Thomas the historian, as having a “more generalised care to extend his documentation, to check his sources, to ascertain the authenticity of the documents he uses. We cannot expect to find in him the critical demands of contemporary erudition, but there exists in him a genuinely historical attitude.”<sup>20</sup> The principal example given of this approach is St Thomas’s *Catena aurea*.

So far I have looked essentially at how we relate to the early history of the Order, to our origins in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but in fact most of us belong to an entity that was not actually founded by St Dominic, but has been grafted on, in one way or another, to the trunk of the Dominican tree. Thus we have other origins also, if we belong to a congregation or to a monastery founded by somebody else, most likely in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. So there is this second level of history to relate to, which arguably in the case of congregations can be even more significant than the first level, as it determines the apostolate and the style of life of future recruits.

The personality of such foundresses can be of major importance. One only has to think of Suzanne Noffke’s remarkable biography of Mother Maria Benedicta Bauer from Holy Cross Monastery at Regensburg, Bavaria.<sup>21</sup> She was a truly formidable woman; whether she knew anything about 13<sup>th</sup> century history is probably a moot point, and on the whole I think she is unlikely to be canonized, but this is an amazing story, and those who belong to the Racine congregation, or to any that came from the same branch of the Dominican tree, certainly need to know about this woman, for she has probably impinged on their religious life far more than St Dominic.

So we have to face the reality that many of our 19<sup>th</sup> century founders and foundresses may have had far from perfect knowledge of Dominican history. Maybe it was just convenient to become Dominicans, or it happened through an accidental – or providential – meeting with a Dominican friar. Maybe that does not matter, but it certainly had an influence on the way the congregation developed, on its particular Dominican identities, for this identity has indeed a plural dimension. If you prefer, it is somewhat akin to the concept of parallel universes in quantum physics.

All this reminds me of an American nun I met at Prouilhe who told me that she had been irritated when she entered her monastery, as an older sister kept telling her: “Our monastery was founded by Fr Saintourens, who came from France”.<sup>22</sup> She kept wanting to answer, “No it wasn’t, it was founded by St Dominic.” But surely both sisters were right. The original impetus for founding that monastery came from what Dominic created at Prouilhe in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but the input of Fr Saintourens at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was far from negligible, for he promoted the perpetual recitation of the rosary, which was

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<sup>20</sup>Jean-Pierre TORRELL, “Le Côté historien de Thomas d’Aquin”, *Mémoire Dominicaine* n°20, 2006, p.15.

<sup>21</sup>Suzanne NOFFKE op, *The Dominicans of Racine, Wisconsin*, Volume I “Embrace the Swelling Wave”, Bloomington IA, Authorhouse, 2004, 605 p.

<sup>22</sup>Fr Damien-Marie SAINTOURENS op (1835-1920), founder of the Dominican Sisters of the Perpetual Rosary, whom he had originally intended to be active sisters, promoting the rosary apostolate and not enclosed nuns. Things turned out differently, however, under the influence of his collaborator, Sr Rose de Sainte Marie Wehrlé, a nun of Mauléon monastery, France.

unknown at the time of St Dominic but had been an important feature of the life of that American monastery at Buffalo NY since its foundation in 1905.

Iconoclasm is not the name of the game, however: the simple fact that we cannot trace something back directly to St Dominic does not mean that it is without value or that we should reject it. By no means, but it is surely good to be aware of the different layers that go to make up our history. At Fanjeaux, for example, I regularly take groups to visit the house of St Dominic. And one of the things I have to tell the pilgrims is that there is no way we can know for certain that this actually was the house that Dominic lived in when he was parish priest at Fanjeaux. But, I add, and it is an important but, for one thing it would have been a house similar to this, in this part of the village, and surely he is in any case made present now by our prayers and the veneration of generations of pilgrims. But here I am moving out of the register of scientific history, into the realm of spiritual mythology, which inevitably enters into religious discourse, and has its own value. The important thing is to be able to distinguish the one from the other.

Several times mention has been made of a Dominican tree and the grafting on of new shoots. This is a very helpful image, because that is the way most fruit is produced. People who have apple or cherry orchards do not keep sewing apple pips or cherry stones in the ground. They take a cutting from an already established plant and graft it on to older wood. The fruit that grows on this new branch is getting its sap, its life force from the original trunk, but it is producing a new and different kind of fruit. That is to say, that to be faithful to the charism of Dominic, we don't all have to live like the first nuns of Prouilhe did in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. But it will surely help us to be who we are, if we know as much as possible about who they were.

It would seem appropriate to conclude with a quotation from Tertullian, a Father of the Church who predates the Dominican Order by close on a thousand years. In his treatise on the preaching of the apostles he writes: "Everything is, of necessity, characterised by its origins". That is the beginnings determine what will ensue. And what Tertullian applies to the Church, I think we can extend to the branches of the Dominican Order. He says: "These churches then numerous as they are, are identical with that one primitive apostolic Church from which they all come. All are primitive and all apostolic, provided that all are one. Their common unity is proved by fellowship in communion, by the name of brother or sister, and the mutual pledge of hospitality—rights which are governed by no other principle than the single tradition."<sup>23</sup>

I would have to admit that it does not always seem that the Dominican family is living up to this ideal of which Tertullian speaks. We fall down in the areas of fellowship, hospitality, and even, I fear, mutual respect. But this is not the fault of history—our history is there, our tradition is inviting us. It remains for us to strengthen our own sense of Dominican identity and belonging, and to encourage others in our family to do the same, in the hope that we will all recognise ourselves and be recognised by others as authentic branches of the primitive, apostolic Dominican Order.

History is just one aspect of Dominican life, yet it behoves those who work in that domain to do as Dominic did: to preach by word and by example. As we seek to transmit the tradition and the heritage of the past, we must be sure to do all we can to live by those same values ourselves. To return now to the book of Deuteronomy, which was our point of departure, shortly before Moses dies, he recapitulates the key events of the covenant, retelling the history of God's alliance with his people. Although these are past events, it is the word "today" that dominates in Moses' narrative; it is used five times in four verses. "God made this covenant today... in order to make a nation of you today..."<sup>24</sup> Surely we have a parallel bond with St Dominic, a bond that he makes anew with us today, so that today we can be *his* Order in the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And indeed these words and traditions that are transmitted to us are a life giving

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<sup>23</sup> TERTULLIAN, *On Prescription against Heretics* quoted in the Divine Office, vol. II, p.137\*-138\* (3<sup>rd</sup> May, feast of Saints Philip and James, apostles).

<sup>24</sup> Deuteronomy, 29; 11-12.

force, for as it says in the book of Leviticus: “Whoever complies with my laws and my customs will find life in them”.<sup>25</sup>

This is why what is entrusted to our keeping cannot just be kept locked up in a cupboard in the motherhouse! Rather the historian or the archivist, to jump now from Moses to the gospel, must put his or her lamp on the lamp stand, so that it may give light to all of those who are in the house.<sup>26</sup> For what we have “in our keeping” as members of the Dominican family is indeed a powerful source of light for the world, and the preaching of the historian can be a very significant part of the mission of the Order.

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<sup>25</sup> Leviticus, 18; 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Cf.* Matthew, 5; 14.