

## IN OUR KEEPING

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In Search of a Larger Pulpit

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You can't fool me. I know why I was asked to give this talk. It is because of my warm personality. The only problem is that if you look up warm in the dictionary it says, "warm means not so hot!" I imagine some of you have puzzled over the title of my talk. Others perhaps have not puzzled but pondered its meaning. Puzzling and pondering are friends; they jump together on the trampoline of truth. So let me attempt to explain the title by a phrase found in W.H. Auden's poem, *New Year Letter*. The poet writes, "...truth, like love and sleep, resents approaches that are too intense." My talk is not intense and I hope will be worthy of both your puzzling and pondering.

Thank you so much for the invitation to be part of this marvelous conference. I will try in my presentation to make three points:

- We will make an intentional connection between preaching, research, history, record keeping and archives.
- We will raise the question, how do we write the history of the future?
- We will explore what holds us together.

### **Making the Connection**

From the very beginning, the goals of Parable were clear.

- To promote research and study of Dominican life and mission.
- To promote a renewed understanding of Dominican spirituality.
- To recognize the charism shared by Dominican men and women as a means of strengthening the bonds with the Family.
- To encourage and help collaborative efforts among Dominicans as a means of renewing the mission of the Order in the Church.

It made sense for Parable to sponsor the first of many conferences entitled In Our Keeping. It made even more sense to ask Sister Mary Nona McGreal to be an integral part of the planning of the first and the many In Our Keeping Conferences, which were held almost every other year in different places around the country. Although Parable is no longer a reality, what was known as Parable retreats, the armchair version of the Lands of Dominic and obviously the In Our Keeping Conference; all of these events are alive and well as are numerous other collaborative efforts among Dominicans not only in North America but around the world. As members of the Order of Preachers we are always in search of a larger pulpit at the same time we are almost fanatic about not letting small things be forgotten. It is therefore more than appropriate, it is essential that we make the connection between preaching, research, history, records, customs, and traditions. It is our inheritance which gives us credentials to occupy not only the pulpit, but the universities. How very appropriate that the McGreal Center is here at Dominican University.

Paul in his epistles makes it clear that because of the Holy Spirit we each have different gifts. What Paul says makes me feel better and not at all guilty about not being an archivist or a historian. Some of my best friends are archivists and historians; after all, preachers need good friends. But there is a connection beyond friendship between preaching, history, research and record keeping. It is called hermeneutics. Broadly speaking hermeneutics is the art of interpretation; and every homily is a hermeneutical act. The purpose of the hermeneutical enterprise is to offer a new understanding of a text, sometimes by questioning or even subverting the presuppositions that readers and hearers bring to a text. Why? So that a powerful new meaning can be created.

Why are records kept in archives, why do historians write histories if the what, the how, the whom and the why are not meant to be interpreted in order to make meaning of all that has happened? It is obvious to me that preachers, archivists and historians continue to search for a larger pulpit because we are, despite the diversity in our job descriptions, we are always about interpretation. Because of the archives, because of the histories already written, the records already kept, there are still stories, artifacts, records, pieces of truth, interpretations still to be found, cataloged, recorded, written and published. There are still homilies to be preached and histories of the future to be written. We must always keep searching for the larger pulpit together. It is called collaboration. It is at the very heart of what it means to be family. When I speak about collaboration I use a metaphor: DANCING! Dancing can help us be realistic about collaboration. Some people love to dance, others dance because it seems the thing to do, others are spectators, others abstain, distain, refrain for their own reasons. It is the same with collaboration.

When I was in high school Miss Plamondon was hired to teach us to rumba. Miss Plamondon had a young face and remarkable hair. It was snow white and stood straight up as if she had stuck her tongue in a wall socket. Her face and her hair together gave the appearance that her hair had received some heinous news years ago about which her face was yet to be informed. But Miss Plamondon's appearance was not her most remarkable quality. Miss Plamondon taught us to rumba by telekinesis. She would sit bold upright in a straight back chair and without moving a muscle teach us to master the dance. We were an all girls high school so the tall girls were taught to lead and the rest of us to follow. Miss Plamondon's fame spread to the boy's high school and she was eventually hired at Loras Academy to teach the boys to rumba. Much to our surprise, the two schools were brought together one afternoon for a public rumba exhibition. Ever since that afternoon, certain tall girls and certain short boys have not cared much for dancing. So it goes with collaboration and collaboration is very much a part of our need for a larger pulpit.

### **How Do We Write the History of the Future?**

Our longing for a larger pulpit, is only one part of our mutuality. We must always pay attention to what we need to remember. In 1977 a small little paperback entitled, *In Small things Forgotten*, by James Deetz was published. It is part of my personal library and its charm has continued to influence my use of story in my preaching and writing. But it might have appeal to you in your areas of work because James Deetz writes, "The tiny ship that dropped anchor in Plymouth harbor in the December cold of 1620 carried a precious cargo. Its 102 passengers, all English, who had come to the New World for a variety of reasons, brought with them a blue print—in their minds—for recreating the culture they had left behind."

If you happen to fall in love with this simple little book it will be because you have grown in a deeper understanding of these ordinary people who came to this country in 1620, at the same time you will achieve a better understanding of yourselves. Is that not what happens in your ministry as archivist, as historian? As you spend time with all of the records, as you read the various histories, as you listen to people tell you stories about what and who and when and why, do you not grow in your understanding not only of what has gone before, but what is reality now? Don't you, because of your wisdom, your perspective which only history and records can give, don't you have a way of seeing a future which others might not?

There are three ways to both write and record history. Some historians use a chronological approach; dates and events with little or no interpretation. Another approach is similar in that dates and events are faithfully recorded but the history is presented in a factual, somewhat pedantic telling—an objective perspective with perhaps some expanded explanation, a realistic context, but a telling of what happened without even a hint of interpretation or subjectivity. Then there is a third way to write history—history as storytelling. The historian tries to tell the truth beneath the facts and around the dates. Perhaps this kind of history can be accused of being too subjective, but it is certainly much more interesting reading.

I am reminded of the story telling approach to history in both Volumes I and II of *The Order of Preachers in the United States: A Family History*. I also find this same approach in the book entitled *How the Irish Saved*

*Western Civilization.* In the preface to this book Thomas Cahill writes, “We normally think of history as one catastrophe after another, war followed by war, outrage by outrage, almost as if history were nothing more than all the narratives of human pain, assembled in sequence. But history is also the narratives of grace, the recounting of those blessed and inexplicable moments when someone did something for someone else, saved a life, bestowed a gift, gave something beyond what was required by circumstance.” Today is history. This In Our Keeping Conference is a story about an inexplicable moment of unconditional love. If that rendering of this event is too subjective, so be it. It is the preacher in search of a larger pulpit who is reading the history of this moment.

But keeping the records, making the archives come alive, writing the histories, recording the stories, all of the work that goes into connecting tradition with both today and tomorrow is hard work and some days are harder than others. On these days I suggest you remember the kindergarten teacher who struggled to get the boots on a little boy who was not being very helpful in the task. After she sat back on her heels and said to him, “There, the boots are on.” The little boy said to her, “These are not my boots!” “I’m sorry,” she said as she struggled to pull them off. Just as she finished, he said, “They are my brother’s boots, but my mom says I have to wear them because they fit me just fine.” Struggling to smile, she worked as hard as before and got the boots back on. But with the final tug, the little boy suddenly said, “They’re on the wrong feet!” The teacher was embarrassed, she had been putting on boots for years and this was a first. So off the boots came and on they went, this time on the right feet. The teacher sat back on her heels triumphant over her success. Smiling and perspiring she said, “Now, where are your mittens?” “They’re in my boots” he said. Some days are harder than others!

### **What Holds Us Together?**

I remember reading an article written years ago by the French Dominican Tillard. The article was translated and appeared in a Dominican publication. As I worked on the presentation, I tried to find the article but stopped looking and instead tried to remember what I learned by heart about charism as I experience in my own Dominican life what the article said. Charism is contagious. It spans decades, centuries. It crosses oceans. It bears fruit in situations and circumstances that could not have been imagined when it first appeared. This cannot happen if the charism is not ceaselessly reexamined, re-appropriated, renewed, given flesh and blood over and over again. Yes, within the church, yes within the world. Survival of the charism depends on fidelity as well as imagination, tradition as well as discovery, the given as well as the created, what is both handed down and what is seen as reality today. Any attempt to shelter or protect the charism, to lock it into a timeless zone or air tight closet will smother it. The charism cannot live with hardened arteries. The entire Dominican family bears the responsibility not only before God, but before the good of all God’s people for the survival of the charism. Today something new is being born. Today we need newness. Today we need a new way to translate, understand, transmit the Dominican charism. We need a youthful spirit. We need to rediscover the original freshness of our charism!

When we use the term charism we are talking about a particular stamp, a unique mark, a kind of spiritual tattoo you might say which makes either an individual or a group identifiable, and alive! Every religious Order, every religious Congregation within that Order has a charism. That charism is spelled out in its purpose, in its mission.

When the Order of Preachers was established it was not given the name of the Founder. Over the centuries we have found ourselves content with being identified as Dominicans. When you know Dominic as a brother and a friend, when you really know him, his deepest longings for his Dominican Family, you know that he would rather we identify ourselves as Preachers than introduce ourselves as Dominicans. The more we take to heart the meaning of our charism, the more we understand that our identity is our mission, the more we understand that as preachers, as Dominican preachers our mission is not our identity. Our mission is to introduce the **word** to the world, our mission is not to introduce ourselves.

It is not possible for us to talk about our charism without talking about our mission. Recently we have been graced with the insights of our brother Bruno Cadore. Bruno as Master General of the Order of Preachers is Dominic's successor and Bruno is what Dominic was, a master teacher. Bruno has very recently reminded us that the Dominican charism must be actualized but without provoking any fracture. You, in your ministry understand what he meant when he said, "continuity must be sought." Isn't that at the very heart of all you do as archivists, record keepers and historians? Bruno speaks to our hearts when he says that continuity will be a reality if we listen to human beings. And so because of you we listen, we record, we interpret, we preserve, we retain all that is part of our story. And all of that truth is in your keeping. What is essential to the charism is in your keeping.

What does the Dominican charism mean today? It means we are sisters and brothers who are preachers. We have chosen to be sisters or brothers of humanity. We have chosen to be in relationship, kinship with those who feel close in faith and in the Church, but also in relationship to those who are away from us. We believe that relationship, being family, is a gift of God to the world. Dominic made this choice in his time when he began preaching. He decided to be close to the people thus giving an example of humanity and of life in community.

And so we ask does the Dominican charism need renewal to be able to face modern society? The answer is yes. We must actualize our charism to face a different culture. Different in the west than it is in the east; different in Africa, Asia, Central and South America. Our charism needs to adjust to every culture; at the same time some basic things do not change for us as Dominicans. We must always be friends of the people; we must always be preachers; we must always give people the best of ourselves. Why? So that people understand that God is something marvelous for them. That awareness of who God is has everything to do with how we approach justice. Do we do justice to who God is? That is not just a question for theologians; it is a question for preachers who long for both justice and peace. Just preaching begins with God not with one or another social issue.

How do we preach justice from our charism? Let us begin with acknowledging that all life is contradictory. As preachers, we place ourselves at the center of all contradictions. We call that place a pulpit. Not all pulpits are in churches. Some pulpits are computers, others are vaults in archives, hospital or hospice rooms are also pulpits, so are food pantries, prisons, parking lots, super markets, airports, classrooms, offices...and on and on. The contemporary justice question for us as members of the Order of Preachers, regardless of our ministry or job description, the contemporary question for us is simply, **do we occupy the pulpit?**

## **Conclusion**

For a long time I have thought that Catherine of Siena should be seen not only as the patroness of preachers but also the patroness of historians, archivists and record keepers. I say this because she is the one who recommends a kind of spiritual methodology for us. It is Catherine who suggests we begin by remembering. But we don't stop with remembering because the more that we remember, the more we come to understand. But we don't stop with understanding because the more we understand, the deeper the longing. Everyone here, because of our ministries, has seen the value of memory, the role of understanding and the wisdom of longing. After all we do have something in common, as we search for a larger pulpit. It is our vocation which Frederick Buechner describes as the point where our deepest gladness meets one of the world's greatest needs. The McGreal Center meets one of the world's greatest needs. I thank the entire staff of the McGreal Center. I thank the McGreal Advisory Board. I thank the planning committee for the 2012 In Our Keeping Conference. I thank Donna Carroll for her consistent and wise vision in making the McGreal Center a part of the University, I thank Diane Kennedy for her stewardship and Mary Ellen O'Grady for her years of service. I thank Mary Sue Kennedy for her present ministry as Executive Director of the Dominican Sisters Conference. I am particularly grateful for the presence of our Nuns at this Conference as well as the Dominican Laity. The genius of Dominic is found within the Dominican Family and the collaborative movements within the Family are alive and well as evidenced by this conference. Indeed, the McGreal Center

has found a parable to work with and the seed that once was Parable seems about to bud in what used to be a green house when I went to college here.

And finally cherished Janet, I cannot thank you enough, for your transparent vulnerability, your wise and prudent witness, your courageous and fun loving spirit, your longing for a larger pulpit. The tradition of In Our Keeping gives all of us gusto and the reality of this year's conference gives us such hope.