



THE LIFE OF SAINT DOMINIC

FRATERNITIES OF SAINT DOMINIC • PROVINCE OF SAINT JOSEPH

Postulancy

MODULE 1

Saints and Their Legacies

Many people wonder why St Dominic is not as popular as St. Francis. Some saints, like St. Francis of Assisi, become a living image of holiness and an object of a cult as soon as they are dead. They leave behind them a vivid remembrance of what they were.

Other saints, like St. Dominic de Guzman, hid behind the works that live after them, and the ideals that they prompted others to follow. Like a signpost, Dominic points away from himself and toward the Savior. Rather than returning to the thoughts of Dominic as person, people come back to the ideas of his order.

Dominic and the Times in Which He Lived

The turn of the thirteenth century is a time of renewed vigor for Europe. Commerce is revived; towns rise up. The shining cities of Paris, London and Bologna grow in size, power and influence. The Greek philosopher Aristotle's ideas begin to fascinate the mind of the West. But in the midst of this new life, ecclesiastical corruption surfaces, despite efforts of reformers like Pope Innocent III. The new middle class, living in the cities, is skeptical and increasingly educated. These city dwellers are not helped by a clergy pitifully untrained or by monastic orders that are mainly rural and isolated from the currents of daily city life.

Attempts to Respond

In the twelfth century, the Church sought to reform herself. Monasticism experienced rejuvenation with the Cistercians and Carthusians. Diocesan clergy began to live a community life of poverty united to their bishop in the tradition of Christ and his apostles. This spirituality energized the canons regular. Cathedral chapters like that at Osma began to develop. St. Norbert of Xanten (1134), who began as an itinerant preacher, founded the canons regular of Premontre and aimed at the rejuvenation of preaching and parochial life. The Premonstratensians remained rural and strongly monastic with the result that their ministry was localized.

In a number of places, itinerant lay preachers like the poor men of Lyons attempted to return to the simplicity of the early Church and the gospel-fervor of its early preachers. Unfortunately, they and others were poorly instructed. When the Church sought to give direction to their movement, they rebelled and fell into schism and heresy.

It is into such a world that Dominic de Guzman is born and grows up. Dominic, founder of the Dominicans, the Order of Friars Preachers, ranks as one of the greatest preachers in the history of the Church, one who restored the preaching ideal of Jesus Christ and his Twelve Apostles.

1170 – 1202

The Hidden Life: Dominic's First Career

Born in the Castilian village of Caleruega in 1170, Dominic grew up the son of Felix de Guzman and Jane Aza of the Spanish nobility. Dominic's early education came from his maternal priest uncle, the archpriest Gumiel d'Izan, who lost no time training him in the practices of the Church. Dominic had two brothers, both priests. His brother Anthony was a priest devoted to works of mercy in a hospice. His second priest brother, Mannes, eventually joined the Order of Preachers.

In 1184 at the age of 14, Dominic entered the Cathedral School at Palencia where he studied liberal arts and theology for ten years. "During this time Dominic's memory worked on the *Divina Pagina*, the sacred text. He became so impregnated with it that he later knew whole portions of it almost by heart. Dominic meditated on the Gospel of Matthew and the Epistles of Paul in the manner of *lectio divina*."

Shortly after Dominic sold his hand-annotated parchments of Sacred Scripture to gain money to feed the poor, Diego Acebo, bishop of Osma, invited Dominic to join the Cathedral Chapter as a canon. Dominic became sub-prior after his priestly ordination.

During this time at Osma, Bishop Diego adopted the Rule of Saint Augustine for use by the canons. Dominic and the earliest friars would later choose this rule as the rule of the Order of Friars Preachers. Also at Osma, Dominic acknowledged that John Cassian's *Conferences* of the fathers of the desert helped him to grow in virtue and holiness.

Dominic Shifts the Religious Paradigm

Dominic's accomplishments can be summarized in two ways by which he changed the prevailing religious paradigm. First, he gave a new dimension to the pastoral ministry by making preaching commonplace within the Church. At this time, preaching in general was infrequent and rudimentary. Preaching was limited to the bishops and those priests they allowed to preach, usually the pastors. Yet neither was always sufficiently active

in his duty. Parochial clergy were poorly educated and poorly formed spiritually. This limited their preaching to the rudimentary elements of the faith.

In the second sense, Dominic gave new development to medieval religious life. The monasticism of the early Church stressed a life of seclusion and stability. Monastic life occurred within the discipline of the cloister, removed from the distractions and tensions of any active apostolate. Monks understood themselves as “learners and seekers” of God. The canons regular, on the other hand, were clergymen attached to a cathedral and living the common life under an adapted Rule of St. Augustine. The canons, rather than learners and seekers, understood themselves to be “teachers” of their neighbors by word and example. Theirs was a life of pastoral activity. It was in this life of the active apostolate that Dominic was formed and in which he initially preached. And it was from this life of localized apostolic activity that Dominic drew the impetus and the springboard to launch a universal order of preachers, mendicants not bound by the cloister or the cathedral, but committed to preaching wherever the highways and byways led them.

Dominic Lived in Troubled Times

The times in which Dominic lived are similar to our own. There were problems in both eras that needed addressing by the Church. Ecumenical councils (the Fourth Lateran Council in Dominic’s day, the Second Vatican in our own time) were held to resolve the problems.

1203 – 1214 Travels and Encounters

Dominic’s second career began in 1203 when he and his bishop were exposed to the ravages of the Albigensian heresy in Southern France.

En route to the Marches on a diplomatic mission, Bishop Diego accompanied by Dominic, passed through Toulouse and stopped at an inn for supper. The innkeeper, a man deeply influenced by the Albigensian thought of his day, and Dominic conversed all through the night. By dawn, Dominic, with his strong convictions and great love, had persuaded the innkeeper to return to the faith. This was Dominic’s first recorded conversion. The incident caused Bishop Diego and Dominic to begin a mission of evangelical preaching designed to combat the erroneous beliefs of the Albigensian heresy and reconcile people to the Church.

Dominic’s tears for sinners and fervent prayer on their behalf brought many graces to his preaching ministry. Jordan of Saxony, the successor to St. Dominic as Master of the Order, said that “God had given [Dominic] a special grace of prayer for sinners, the poor, those in distress; he made their misfortunes his own in the intimate sanctuary of his compassion and the tears which welled from his eyes were an indication of the fer-

vour which was burning in him...” (Vicaire, 44)

After completing his second trip to the Marshes as part of his royal mission in the service of the king, Diego went to Rome to request a new mission from the pope. Diego asked the pope to be allowed to resign his diocese, so he could go and preach to the pagans. The pope refused and told him to return to his diocese. Diego was obedient, but not without an adventure on the way. The bishop returned to Osma by way of Citeaux in order to receive the habit of the Cistercian monks. He then went on to Montpellier where he met other Cistercians who had been appointed by the pope to combat heresy in the south of France. It was April 1205 and these monks were thinking about abandoning their mission because of its lack of fruit. They asked Diego for advice. Diego told them not to abandon their preaching, but to concentrate on it exclusively. He advised the monks first to reform themselves and adopt an ascetical style of life in imitation of the apostles, the lifestyle adopted by the heretics. They were to travel on foot, in poverty and humility, and beg for their food. In this way, their preaching would bear fruit.

The three papal envoys agreed to give the new method a try, provided some one gave them the lead. Diego accepted the challenge and sent his servants and horses home, keeping only Dominic with him. They set out to preach and walked round the district proclaiming the gospel and engaging in theological disputes. Unable to refute Dominic’s arguments, the Albigensians instead insulted Dominic and threatened him with violence.

In 1206, with the permission of Bishop Fulk of Toulouse, Diego establish a monastery at Prouille, France for women converted to the Catholic faith through the preaching of the bishop and the saint. This community of women was entrusted to Diego and Dominic’s care and would become, in 1218, the second branch—the nuns—of the Order of Preachers.

In 1207 when Diego returned to his diocese to raise money, Dominic and a small band of preachers continued the ministry. Upon his departure, Diego left the temporal care of the preachers and the nuns to William of Claret; their spiritual care he entrusted to Dominic.

Bishop Diego died before he could return to France and Dominic became the leader of the mission and the official custodian of a community at Prouille. With Prouille as their headquarters, the preachers extended their preaching journeys to the towns of Fanjeaux, Montpellier, Servian, Beziers, and Carcassonne.

From 1205 – 1215, Dominic preached to and engaged in theological disputations with the Albigensians, reconciling converts to the Church. Dominic showed good example by living the preaching style of the Apostles in the Gospel, a ministry lived out in poverty and simplicity. Dominic’s experience among the Albigensians showed that successful preaching to the heretic could not depend on neither the chance fielding

of preachers or the use of clerics not dedicated to a preaching vocation or properly trained in theological knowledge.

1215 – 1221 From Toulouse to the World

Thus by 1215, Dominic and a small group of followers formed themselves as preaching order of canons regular under the authority of Bishop Fulk in Toulouse. Each man of the foundation professed vows to Dominic as their head, and together they bound themselves to the habit, daily Mass, the Divine Office, study, itinerancy, and poverty.

In 1215, Papal legate, Peter Beneventi, appointed Dominic head of a preaching mission in Toulouse. There, the dream of an order of preachers began to be realized. Bishop Fulk welcomed the community of preachers in his diocese and authorized them to preach anywhere in his territory and to recruit new members. The preachers would not be attached to any particular church, but had broader rein. Bishop Fulk issued a charter formalizing the order, and Peter Seila donated his house to Dominic and his men. But Dominic's vision was broader than diocesan or regional activity; hence, he decided to seek papal confirmation of his new community, preparatory to a Church wide apostolate.

Dominic and Bishop Fulk journeyed to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 with the intention of asking Pope Innocent III "to confirm...an order which would be and would be called an Order of Preachers" (Jordan of Saxony, *On the Beginnings of the Order of Preachers*, 40). In response to Dominic's request, the pope instructed him to return to Toulouse and, with his brethren, unanimously choose a rule of life for the new order. They quickly chose the Rule of St. Augustine, adding to it stricter observances on diet, fasting, bedding, and clothing. Additionally, they all agreed to own no property, but to accept only offerings to provide for their food.

The Order of Preachers was confirmed by Pope Honorius III on December 22, 1216. One month later, on January 21, 1217, Honorius approved the special end of the order: preaching for the salvation of souls.

Because the rule of St Augustine laid down general principles of common life, but few specific details, Dominic adopted parts of the customs of Premontre. The constitutive chapter revised some of these customs and then completed the order's legislation. The chapter also committed the order to mendicancy, daily begging for the food of the community; hence the name mendicant friars. Because Dominic realized that the work of preaching required poverty for evangelical effectiveness, he insisted upon its strict practice.

In 1217, Dominic decided to disperse his brethren to Madrid, Bologna, and Paris. In each locale, as well as in the city of Rome, the preaching friars were given Churches in which to conduct their ministry. Ultimately, because of his great support for the order,

Pope Honorius gave Dominic the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome. He also gave him his own family land to build a convent for the friars.

In 1220, the first General Chapter was held in Bologna. Although Dominic asked to resign as head of the order, the chapter refused to remove him, but legislated that the chapter, not he, had superior authority to make decisions. The constitutions and administrative details of the order were formed at this meeting. From then on the head of the order was to be called *magister*, *magister praedicationis*, or *magister praedicatorum*.

Dominic also wanted the lay brothers to have full responsibility for the material affairs of the order, so the clerical brethren could devote themselves entirely to study and preaching. This suggestion was not accepted. In 1221, the second General Chapter expanded the territory of the order and established several new provinces.

On August 6, 1221, as Dominic lay dying at St. Mary of the Hills outside of Bologna, he assured his weeping brethren that he would be of even greater assistance where he was going. He left them his last Will and Testament: "Behold, my children, the heritage I leave you: have Charity for one another, guard Humility, make your treasure out of voluntary Poverty." In 1234, Dominic was canonized a saint by Pope Gregory IX.

Dominic: An Innovator

Dominic was an innovator, in proposing to establish a community of priests to share directly in the preaching office of the bishop. At the Council of Trent, 400 years after Dominic, the Church for the first time in 1600 years of Christianity required parish priests to preach a Sunday sermon.

Dominic, at the first General Chapter of the Order, established that the rule and constitutions were not to bind under sin, and that all provisions were dispensable for the sake of preaching and study. This commitment to study in the order is a unique contribution of Dominic in developing a new form of religious life.

Although choral prayer was also essential for his order, Dominic balanced the need for liturgical prayer with the needs of preaching and study. Earlier orders had a prolonged choral life, spending many hours of their day in liturgical prayer and chant; Dominic reduced this obligation. Yet while he may have shortened the length of time spent in the choir, he still encouraged his brethren to pray with great devotion.

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Glossary

ALBIGENSIANS (Cathars) are a neo-Manichean sect that flourished in the south of France in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. They taught that there were two creators, one who is good, and the other bad. The former was the creator of the invisible or spiritual world that alone was good; the latter was the creator of the material world that was bad. They also taught that the Old Testament was the Bible of the devil and all patriarchs and prophets were damned. All the sacraments were considered bad, and matrimony was especially evil. Suicide was not only permissible but also meritorious.

APOSTLE One of the 12 disciples, as well as Saint Paul. They are close friends of Jesus whom He sent out to preach the Good News of the Gospel to the whole world.

CANON REGULAR A member of a Cathedral Chapter or other body of clerics set up to assist the diocesan bishop. A canon lives a common life with a church approved rule

CARTHUSIANS An order of contemplative monks founded by St. Bruno in 1084.

CASSIAN, JOHN (360 –435) A mystic of the 4th and 5th centuries. Cassian is best known the author of the *Conferences* (in full *Conferences of the Egyptian Monks or Collations of the Fathers*)

CISTERCIANS – A strict order of monks following the Rule of St Benedict, founded in 1098 at Citeaux.

CUIT A great devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing.

HERESY A false doctrine or false interpretation of true doctrine.

ITINERANT People or preachers who travel.

LECTIO DIVINA The process of slowly and prayerfully reading a passage of sacred Scripture so as to “drink in” it riches.

MENDICANT FRIARS Members of orders who by the vow of poverty depend on begging for their personal sustenance. The Augustinians, Franciscans, Carmelites, Dominicans, Mercedarians and Servites are mendicant orders

MONASTICISM The manner of life lived by monks who reside together under a common rule, who are secluded from the world to devote themselves fully to the service of God.

PAGAN A person who does not believe in the one true God. One who adheres to all forms of polytheistic religions.

PREMONSTRATIENSIS—NORBERTINES Canons regular founded by St Norbert in 1120, at Premontre, France.

RULE OF SAINT AUGUSTINE The basic regulations for living religious life rule written by St. Augustine in the 5th century. Other rules were composed by St Basil in the 4th century and St. Benedict in the 6th century.

SCHISM Separation from the unity of the Catholic Church.

Discussion Questions

1. How is the rule of mendicant poverty different from the prevailing monastic culture of Dominic’s day? What advantages did this mode of living have for the preacher in a country that admired the Gospel austerity of the first apostles?
2. What role does providence play in our lives? Does the Holy Spirit direct our lives for His purposes and the salvation of souls? In what way are the times of Dominic a mirror of our times?
3. For whom did Dominic intercede? For whom do we pray and intercede? Do we pray before the Holy Eucharist as Dominic did?
4. Discuss the ways in which the Order of Preachers is a paradigm shift from previous religious life.
5. Do we use love and the convincing power of the Holy Spirit to bring about the conversion or the change of heart of those whom God places in our path? Do we pray for those with whom we disagree and intercede with them using a dialogue of understanding and compassionate love? Can we rely on our past study and meditation on Scripture to use in a time of opportune moment?
6. What impressed you most about the life of St. Dominic? What impact do you plan for it to have on your life?

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