

Charity, Humility and Voluntary Poverty: Saint Thérèse of Lisieux – a Dominican in Disguise?

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To Sister Christine of the Incarnation O.P., a true Dominican and one of God's gentle warriors,
on the double occasion of her 70th birthday and 40th anniversary of Religious Profession

“What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”¹ Tertullian's rhetorical question concerning the relationship between philosophy and the Gospel could perhaps be transposed to the relationship between St. Thérèse of Lisieux and the Dominican tradition. Little Thérèse's overflowing affectivity, her devotion to the Child Jesus and her frequent mention of flowers and birds may perhaps appeal to a Franciscan heart but, as Timothy Radcliffe O.P. says, the Dominicans tend to take a more “robust approach”, hesitating to use “sugary and sentimental” language,² and the only famous story involving St. Dominic and a bird, is the one where the devil disguised as a bird distracts Dominican nuns from listening to Dominic's preaching. Dominic resolutely captures and plucks the bird, and that is the end of it.³

“How distressed I should be to have read all those books; I would just have got a splitting headache and lost precious time, which I have simply spent in loving God”⁴ sighs Thérèse, while the love of books found its way into the Dominican tradition at an early stage. A 14th century Dominican goes as far as claiming: “Since our own Constitutions state that the Order of Preachers was founded for the study of Sacred Scripture and the salvation of our neighbour ... we ought to know that we are bound to love books!”⁵

In spite of these striking and significant differences, if we take a closer look, perhaps there is more to this relationship than meets the eye – and this not only due to the fact that Thérèse clearly loved Scripture, read and meditated it assiduously, and even said she would have liked to learn Hebrew “to be able to read the word of God in the language in which he was pleased to express himself”⁶ or that she quotes the Dominican Blessed Henry Suso as her source when speaking about the spiritual danger inherent in the use of instruments of penance.⁷ Are there crumbs falling from the child Thérèse's table that the “Dogs of the Lord” might be nourished by and even savour?⁸ And could those who find little Thérèse's dishes hard to digest perhaps through the Dominican tradition receive the Gospel substance of her teaching under different species?

¹ Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 7, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0311.htm> (September 6th 1208).

² Radcliffe, Timothy, O.P., “Letter to our Brothers and Sisters in Initial Formation”, http://www.op.org/sites/www.op.org/files/public/documents/fichier/radcliffe1999_letterformation_en.pdf (September 10th 2018).

³ *Miracles of St. Dominic related by Blessed Cecilia*, 10, <http://opcentral.org/blog/the-miracles-of-st-dominic/> (September 2nd 2018).

⁴ Quoted in Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux & Elizabeth of the Trinity*, trans. D. Nichols, A. E. Englund & D. Martin (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 54.

⁵ Bedouelle, Guy, O.P., *Saint Dominic – The Grace of the Word*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble O.P. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1978), p.165.

⁶ Thérèse of Lisieux: *Histoire d'une âme* (Lisieux, 1923), p. 289. Quoted in Balthasar, *Two Sisters* p. 49.

⁷ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, p. 246.

⁸ Cf. Mark 7:28. Through a word-play on the Latin, *Domini canes* = Dogs of the Lord, has become, so to speak, a pet name for the Dominicans.

While Thérèse was looking for a “little way, a way that is very straight, very short and totally new”,⁹ Dominic’s path is described in the *Dialogue* of St. Catherine of Siena as “broad and joyous”¹⁰ and his Order as a ship where both the perfect and the not-so-perfect fare well.¹¹ Moreover, Dominic’s first mission was towards the Cathar-movement, which emphasized penance and liberation from the body and the world. Its core was constituted by the *perfecti*, the “perfect”, who, in a way, tried to save themselves by a life of strict abstinence on every level, until they died.¹² This is, of course, not at all what Thérèse has in mind when she speaks of “the great souls” to whom she opposes “little souls” like herself.¹³ At the same time, she does target the temptation of Christians of all times to forget that salvation is a free gift of God in and through Jesus Christ, and therefore to somehow try to save themselves by their own works.¹⁴

“Have charity, guard humility, possess voluntary poverty.”¹⁵ This “last will and testament” which Saint Dominic left his followers on the brink of death, does it not in some way evoke Thérèse’s “little way”? Is this perhaps the common ground where the *pugiles fidei*, “champions of the faith”¹⁶, sons and daughters of the *athleta Domini* that was Dominic,¹⁷ might take up arms to fight the good fight side by side with “God’s gentle warrior”¹⁸?

Charity

*Everybody was enfolded in the wide embrace of his charity, and since he loved everyone, everyone loved him. He made it his own business to rejoice with those who were rejoicing and to weep with those who wept. He was full of affection and gave himself utterly to caring for his neighbours and to showing sympathy for the unfortunate.*¹⁹

This description of Dominic, given by Blessed Jordan of Saxony, echoes and sums up many of the testimonies given about him by those who knew him during his lifetime,²⁰ and speaks of the evangelical quality of his life. He truly lived according to the great commandment of love given by Jesus and repeated over and over in the New Testament. Dominic thus exemplified that charity to which he exhorted his followers on his deathbed. “He certainly,” says Jordan, “did not lack the greatest form of charity that a man can have, the charity to lay down his life for his friends”²¹ and illustrates with a story where Dominic was ready to sell himself to help a poor man who was dependent on the Cathars for his living, and so could not free himself from

⁹ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, trans. John Clarke O.C.D. (Washington: ICS Publications, 1975), p. 207.

¹⁰ Catherine of Siena, *Il Dialogo della divina provvidenza*, CLVII, G. Cavallini (ed.) (Rome 1968, p. 462), quoted in Murray, Paul, O.P. *The New Wine of Dominican Spirituality – A Drink Called Happiness* (London: Burns & Oates, 2006), p. 2.

¹¹ *Op.cit.* quoted in Radcliffe, Timothy, O.P. “Preface”, in Murray, *The New Wine*, p. vii.

¹² Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, pp. 173-175.

¹³ E.g. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, pp. 197; 207.

¹⁴ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, p. 241. Halik, Thomas, *Patience with God*, trans. Gerald Turner (New York: Doubleday, 2009), p. 27.

¹⁵ *Legenda Maior Sancti Dominici Humberti de Romanis*, 54,21-26, quoted in Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, p. 261.

¹⁶ Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, p. 180.

¹⁷ Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, p. 182.

¹⁸ This is the subtitle of Thomas R. Nevin’s biography *Thérèse of Lisieux* (Oxford University Press 2006).

¹⁹ Jordan of Saxony: *On the Beginnings of the Order of Preachers*, ed. and trans. Simon Tugwell O.P. (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1982), hereafter referred to as *Libellus*, 107.

²⁰ See “The Canonization Process of Saint Dominic” in *Early Dominicans*, pp. 66-85.

²¹ *Libellus* 35.

their destructive influence. Earlier, as a student in Palencia, he had sold his books and all his possessions to help feed the starving population.²²

If we turn to Thérèse, one could perhaps claim that the essence of her idea of sanctity, is to live a life of love. Her vocation, she says, is love.²³ This has different aspects: the concrete, practical love lived out in her relationships with others, and her mission to “be love in the heart of the Church”²⁴, thus reaching beyond the boundaries of the monastery.

Fraternal love in community

In Thérèse’s case, as in the case of those Dominicans who are professed religious, the immediate surroundings in which she had to put her love into practice, was the religious community. All who have tried it know that this is not an easy task, and Thérèse herself concedes it took her a good while to understand all the implications of it. It is not a matter of feelings, but of acts. Only the year of her death can she say: “God has given me the grace to understand what charity is; I understood it before, it is true, but in an imperfect way.” She had not “fathomed the meaning of these words of Jesus: ‘The second commandment is LIKE the first: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ (Matthew 22:39).”²⁵

I understood now that charity consists in bearing with the faults of others, in not being surprised at their weakness, in being edified by the smallest acts of virtue we see them practice. But I understood above all that charity must not remain hidden at the bottom of the heart. Jesus has said: “No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel basket, but upon the lamp-stand, so as to give light to ALL in the house.” (Matthew 5:15) It seems to me that this lamp represents charity which must enlighten and rejoice not only those who are dearest to us but “ALL who are in the house” without distinction.²⁶

The Rule of Saint Augustine, which Dominic and the first friars chose as their rule of life,²⁷ has a strong emphasis on unity and fraternal love, and this has always marked the spirituality of the Order. The Rule opens with the statement that above all else, the sisters and brothers should “love God and then your neighbour, because these are the chief commandments given to us”.²⁸ The rest of the Rule is simply practical considerations and consequences drawn from this heading.

However, in the Dominican tradition, this life together is not only for the benefit of those sharing in it. The community “united as it is in the love of the Lord, should become a radiant centre of charity to all.”²⁹ The brothers and sisters, says the Fundamental Constitution of the Nuns, “press onward to that perfect love of God and neighbour which is effective in caring for and obtaining the salvation of all.”³⁰ This points us towards the fact that love is expansive. It seeks to share itself, it is missionary. It also reminds us that mission should spring forth from love, from a concern for the true good of others, not from a desire to conquer or dominate them.

²² *Libellus* 10.

²³ Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, p. 194.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, p. 219.

²⁶ Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, p. 220.

²⁷ *Libellus* 42.

²⁸ The Rule of Saint Augustine, hereafter RA, 1.

²⁹ The Book of Constitutions of the Nuns of the Order of Preachers, hereafter LCM, 14.

³⁰ LCM 1,II.

Indeed, as we shall see, the preaching mission of Dominic and the missionary aspect of Thérèse's vocation are both rooted in their love for God and humanity.

Mission

He had a special prayer which he often made to God, that God would grant him true charity, which would be effective in caring for and winning the salvation of men; he thought he would only really be a member of Christ's Body when he could spend himself utterly with all his strength in the winning of souls, just as the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of us all, gave himself up entirely for our salvation.³¹

For a Dominican nun, living the monastic life as part of an apostolic Order, it can be somewhat difficult to accept the fact that when a cloistered religious was proclaimed Patron Saint of the Missions, it was on a Carmelite, not a Dominican, that the honour was bestowed.³² Mission, evangelization, the preaching of the Gospel: this is the very purpose for which our Order was founded.³³ Thérèse repeatedly refers to her desire to be a missionary, and she is overjoyed to receive a young missionary as her spiritual brother.³⁴ "An apostle of apostles," writes Hans Urs von Balthasar, "this is how Thérèse sees her vocation."³⁵ – and the Dominican nun cannot but think of her own Order's devotion to St. Mary Magdalene, *the Apostle to the Apostles*.³⁶

Balthasar, in his study of Thérèse and her theology in the book *Two Sisters in the Spirit*, offers an interesting analysis of Thérèse's way of being "active in contemplation", seeing contemplation in itself as "a dynamic force", "the source of all fruitfulness, the first impulse in all change".³⁷ He refers to her commentary on John 4:35: "Lift up your eyes and see the countries, for they are white for harvest", where she states that the vocation of contemplatives is not to go out and work in the fields, but to lift up their eyes and see, and then lift up their hearts in prayer to God, to send labourers to His harvest. He also points to her interpretation of the verse from the Song of Songs 1:4: "Draw me after you" and on the prayer of Jesus in John 17, where she expresses her belief that the one who is herself drawn to God and united to Him, cannot but draw with her those "God has given her", those she loves.³⁸ Thérèse, Balthasar writes "is beyond the dualism of passivity and activity, at the point where they meet in Christian love."³⁹ The contemplative life is lived not only for one's own salvation, but for that of others.⁴⁰ In the introduction to the Constitution of the Nuns of the Order of Preachers, a similar vision is presented:

[T]he 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 on 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

³¹ *Libellus* 13.

³² Thérèse was declared as such in 1927 by Pope Pius XI.

³³ LCM: Fundamental Constitution of the Order I – III.

³⁴ Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, p. 251.

³⁵ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, p. 190.

³⁶ See Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, pp. 249-250.

³⁷ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, p. 195.

³⁸ *Op.cit.* pp.196-198.

³⁹ *Op.cit.* p. 199.

⁴⁰ *Op.cit.* p. 194.

*apostolate which the Dominican family exercises as a whole, and in which alone the fulness of the Dominican vocation is to be found.*⁴¹

Several authors have noted as characteristic the place for others in Dominic's contemplation,⁴² and the first monastery of Dominican nuns, founded in Prouilhe in 1206, was from the beginning an integrated part of Dominic's "Holy Preaching".⁴³ So, even though Balthasar presents Thérèse's idea of the contemplative life as something new and unique,⁴⁴ one could perhaps venture to challenge that claim, and say that such a vision has existed in the Dominican tradition since the beginnings of the Order.

Finally, the love that was the source of missionary zeal for both Dominic and Thérèse does not, as St. Paul writes, come to an end (1 Co 13:8). Quoted side by side in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, they both assert that their missions did not end with the end of their earthly journey, and promised that they would continue to do good for their loved ones from their place in heaven⁴⁵ – and their love, growing to the measure of Christ's own, embraces even the most distant.

The heart and the peripheries of the Church

"In medio Ecclesiae, in the heart of the Church, in the midst of the assembly: these words taken from the fifteenth Chapter of Sirach open the Mass of St. Dominic. Nothing", writes Guy Bedouelle, "could better express his vocation, primordially and essentially ecclesiastical."⁴⁶ At the same time, Dominic was inhabited by a desire to reach those farthest away, to go towards the peripheries. Several of the witnesses from the canonization process testified that his wish was, once arrangements were made for the establishment of the Order, to go and preach to the Saracens or the Cumans.⁴⁷

Towards the end of her life, we see Thérèse, who all her life had been filled with a longing for the missions, journey into completely new and foreign land, reaching the most distant of all. She is plunged into obscurity, and loses all sense of God's presence and even her faith as she has previously known it. Her soul is "invaded by the thickest darkness" and the thought of heaven which had up until then been so sweet for her is "no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment."⁴⁸ She now understands what she has not hitherto grasped, that there really are people who live without faith, and she is given to taste their condition.⁴⁹

Thomas Halik draws attention to the fact that Thérèse calls these unbelievers "her brothers, with whom she sits at the same table and eats the same bread – and she begs Jesus not to banish her therefrom. Unlike them, she is aware of the bitterness of this bread, because unlike them, she has known the joy of God's closeness"⁵⁰ What we see here, is Thérèse dying in deep solidarity with those who are separated from God. She shares their lot fully and consciously,

⁴¹ Letter of Anicetus Fernandez, O.P., Master of the Order, introducing the new Constitutions, LCM p. 5.

⁴² E.g. Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, p. 47; Murray, *The New Wine*, pp. 11-13.

⁴³ Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, pp. 205-211. Fernandez, LCM p. 3 and LCM: Fundamental Constitution of the Nuns 1,1.

⁴⁴ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, p. 196.

⁴⁵ CCC 956.

⁴⁶ Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, p. 193.

⁴⁷ Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, pp. 78; 135.

⁴⁸ Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, p. 211.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Halik, *Patience*, p. 29.

like Jesus on the cross. Halik holds that if he is correct in his understanding of Thérèse, her concern is “not simply to draw these unbelievers back into the heart of the church”. More creatively, he sees her concern as “rather to broaden that heart by including their experience of darkness. Through her solidarity with unbelievers, she conquers new territory (along with its inhabitants) for a church that has previously been too closed.”⁵¹

*The fact that Thérèse is “love at the heart of the church”, a love that glows even in the night of faith, that endures even where faith “has died,” proves that this love – and hence also the mysterious “heart of the church,” its deep, hidden dimension – is much broader, deeper, and more openhanded than it previously seemed or seems from outside. There is a place even for those whose certainties (and above all “religious certainties”) have been shaken, uprooted, or thrust into darkness. Aren’t these people in fact just one step from that blessed spiritual poverty, “deprivation,” of which Meister Eckhart spoke, which means “to know nothing, have nothing, be nothing”?*⁵²

Of Dominic it is said that “God had given him a special grace to weep for sinners and for the afflicted and oppressed: he bore their distress in the inmost sanctuary of his compassion, and the warm sympathy he felt for them in his heart spilled over in the tears which flowed from his eyes.”⁵³ “His compassion extended, we are told, ‘not only to the faithful, but also to pagans and unbelievers and even the damned in hell, and he wept a great deal for them.’”⁵⁴ The language, as is the case with Thérèse’s ways of expression, may seem bigoted and judgemental to us, but understood within the historical context it can be seen as an expression of solidarity with those farthest away, a genuine concern for their welfare to the point of “feeling with them”, sharing their suffering. Dominic’s famous prayer: “Lord, what will become of sinners”⁵⁵ shows his compassion and care, and the fact that he used to take the discipline both for his own sins and those of others,⁵⁶ witness to his identification with sinners. He saw himself as one of them, not one looking down at them from a pedestal, and he developed a deep confidence in God’s mercy “for himself and for all sinners”.⁵⁷

The Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément compares Thérèse to Staretz Silouan, who after having had a mystical experience of the fires of hell, heard Christ say to him: “Keep your soul in hell, and do not despair”:

Thérèse trusted in God and resolved to keep faith during the dark night of the soul; her journey into darkness transformed her, the apparent absence of God proved to be part of the spiritual journey. As a young girl she prayed for the murderer Pranzini, and experienced joy at his conversion; towards the end of her life she saw herself sitting at table with sinners, praying for universal salvation. Clément believes that Christians are called to this, to be seated at the table of sinners while

⁵¹ Halik, *Patience*, p. 34.

⁵² Halik, *Patience*, p. 35. In this context, it is worth noting that he quotes a Dominican, Eckhart, one of the Rhineland mystics.

⁵³ *Libellus* 14.

⁵⁴ Murray, *The New Wine*, p. 89.

⁵⁵ Quoted in LCM 74,III.

⁵⁶ “The Nine Ways of Prayer of Saint Dominic” in *Early Dominicans, Selected Writings*, ed. Simon Tugwell, O.P., *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 96.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

*carrying within themselves the mystery of the Resurrection, praying for universal salvation, so that all may taste the joy of the presence of the Holy Spirit.*⁵⁸

Thomas Merton comments on the same words:

*In so far as hell means apparent rejection and darkness, some of us must elect it, as it is ours and Job's way to peace. The far end of nothing, the abyss of our own absurdity, in order to be humble, to be found and saved by God ... I am one who is saved from hell by God, or rather that is my vocation and destiny ... to have the flames of hell around me like Sylvan (Silouan) and to hope I shall be saved.*⁵⁹

This aspect of the spiritual life and mission of Thérèse, and of Dominic and his Order, is in the end about being conformed to Christ suffering in solidarity with a wayward humanity, and even descending into the very depths of hell to search for those long-lost souls sitting “in darkness and the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79). It is indeed that intimate knowledge of Christ, sharing in His sufferings and dying a death like His, of which Saint Paul speaks (Phil 3:10), to which every Christian is in some way invited, so as to experience the power of His resurrection.

Humility

*The novices are to be schooled in humility of heart and manner, conforming to the words of the Gospel: ‘Learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly of heart’ (Mt 11:29). The other prescriptions all flow out of this humility. They are simply its flowering. The brethren may keep no possessions, must learn to give up their own preferences and live in willing obedience.*⁶⁰

This reference to the formation of Dominican novices is said to have its origin in Dominic himself. Known to be a humble man, he was concerned that his brothers and sisters too should be humble, for only in this way could they be conformed to and convincingly preach the humble Christ.⁶¹

Humility, then, is an integral part of the Dominican way to God. “Here is the way, if you would come to perfect knowledge and enjoyment of me, eternal Life:” says God the Father to Saint Catherine of Siena. “Never leave the knowledge of yourself. Then, put down as you are in the valley of humility, you will know me in yourself, and from this knowledge you will draw all that you need.”⁶² Much later, in Lisieux, Thérèse takes up this image of the valley when instructing her own novices: “You wish to scale a mountain, but the good God wants you to descend; he is waiting for you at the bottom of the fertile valley of humility.”⁶³

⁵⁸ Clément, Olivier, *Petite boussoule spirituelle pour notre temps* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2008), pp. 125-126. Referred to in Hugh-Donovan, Stephanie, “Ecclesial thought and life trajectories: an ecumenical dialogue. Part one: Olivier Clément and Thomas Merton” pp. 35-53 in *One in Christ* 45, no 1 (July 2011), p. 47.

⁵⁹ Merton, Thomas, *Turning Towards the World*, 45. Quoted in Hugh-Donovan, “Ecclesial thought and life trajectories” pp. 35-53 in *One in Christ* 45, no 1 (July 2011), p. 46.

⁶⁰ Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, p.109.

⁶¹ “Miscellaneous Texts on Saint Dominic” in *Early Dominicans*, p. 87.

⁶² Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. and intro. Suzanne Noffke, O.P., *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 4, p. 29.

⁶³ Quoted in Murray, Paul, O.P., *In the grip of light* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 29.

Catherine seeks humility, “in order to know better God’s goodness toward her, since upon knowledge follows love.”⁶⁴ For her, as in the Rule of Saint Augustine, humility is linked with charity,⁶⁵ but it is also intimately connected with the important Dominican theme of truth. For “loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it. But there is no way she can so savor and be enlightened by this truth as in continual humble prayer, grounded in the knowledge of herself and of God.”⁶⁶

Truth

*“It seems to me that humility is truth. I do not know whether I am humble. But I do know that I see the truth in everything.” But when a soul becomes so permeated with the truth of God as to live by that truth alone, not darkening it with its own preconceptions, then it becomes possible to express its humility; for then this humility is simply a participation in divine truth.*⁶⁷

“I have never behaved like Pilate, who refused to hear the truth”, says Thérèse. “Always I have said to the good God: O God, I will listen to you gladly; I beg of you to answer me: What is the truth? Make me see things as they are. Let nothing cause me to be deceived.”⁶⁸ “Yes, I believe that I have always sought after truth.”⁶⁹

Veritas – truth – is known as one of the mottos – perhaps *the* motto – of the Dominican Order. Truth or “gentle Truth” are among the names Catherine of Siena gives to God, and for Saint Thomas Aquinas, God is “First Truth” or Truth itself.⁷⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar claims that truth, the search and the battle for truth, is absolutely essential also to Thérèse’s life and doctrine:

*Truth is the touchstone of her love, which is therefore brought into the province of theology. But truth in her case has all the richness, strength and decisiveness that one finds in the words of Holy Scripture: truth as a witness to the light of God illuminating the farthest reaches of one’s being. Her whole life becomes an exposition of God’s word, a sacrifice of all her own truth to the unique truth of God within her. That is her obedience, and it bestows her mission upon her.*⁷¹

To be in the truth means to bring one’s life in accord with God who is Truth, through Christ who is both the Truth, the Way and the Life (John 14:6). Jordan writes of Dominic that “the verdict of Truth himself pronounces him blessed”, referring to Jesus’ saying: “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it” (Luke 8:28). He goes on to say that there are two ways of keeping the word of God: “one is to retain the word in our memories, once we have heard it, the other is to put it into practice and display it in action” and he has no doubt “that the second way is better, just as it is better to keep seed by planting it in the earth than by hoarding it in a

⁶⁴ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 1, p. 25.

⁶⁵ RA 7-9.

⁶⁶ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 1, p. 25.

⁶⁷ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, p. 49.

⁶⁸ *Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations*, trans. John Clarke O.C.D. (Washington: ICS Publications, 1976), p. 105. Quoted in Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, p. 45.

⁶⁹ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, p. 49.

⁷⁰ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue* 2, n. 9, p. 27 and McDermott, Thomas, O.P., *Catherine of Siena: Spiritual Development in Her Life and Teaching* (New York/Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), p. 80. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 16, a. 5.

⁷¹ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, pp. 43-44.

box.” Dominic, of course, kept the word in both these ways: “his memory was a kind of ‘barn’ for God ‘filled to overflowing with crops of every kind,’ and his external behaviour and actions broadcast publicly the treasure that lay hidden in his breast.”⁷²

Truth is also about being truthful in one’s dealings with others, about a unity between life and doctrine. It was said of Dominic: “Another thing which made him so attractive to everybody was his straightforwardness; there was never a hint of guile or duplicity in anything he said or did.”⁷³ He was simple and honest, and his preaching was always, like that of Christ, *verbo et exemplo*, in word and deed.⁷⁴

So, truth is a twofold matter: the truth of God and the truth of our lives. This also involves the struggle to present humanity with a truthful image of God – hence the importance of study in the Dominican tradition. Balthasar writes of Thérèse:

*Her battle is to wipe out the hard core of Pharisaism that persists in the midst of Christianity; that human will-to-power disguised in the mantle of religion that drives one to assert one's own greatness instead of acknowledging that God alone is great. «With the utmost severity and unsparing clarity, Thérèse directs her attack against every ascetical practice that aims, not at God, but at one's own perfection, which is nothing more than spiritual beauty treatment.» Jesus does not demand great deeds but only gratitude and self-surrender.*⁷⁵

As already mentioned, for Dominic too, what is at stake is the truth of who God is and how God deals with humanity. His preaching to the Cathars springs out of his compassion for these people and his love of God which would not see God’s face disfigured for God’s children – the face that was made known to us in the Word made flesh, the one who was full of grace and truth (cf. John 1:14).

Grace

Linked to the truth that is at the heart of Thérèse’s mission, we find a deep trust in grace, and this is something that would resonate with many a Dominican. Paul Murray speaks of the “the Dominican emphasis on *grace* – on the happy recognition, that is, of God’s own saving initiative and for God’s ‘mad’ love for the world”⁷⁶ and he refers to Simon Tugwell O.P. who writes:

*[T]he Dominicans refused to accept the view that God merely makes it possible for me to do good, leaving it to me to actually do it; they retained the much stronger doctrine, derived from St. Paul by way of St. Augustine, that my good deeds, while being genuinely mine, are also entirely due to God. This makes for a much less anxious, much less uptight, kind of spirituality.*⁷⁷

Thérèse’s mission is “to proclaim God’s mercy and to urge men to boundless, ever stronger trust in God’s grace. This she has experienced, this her life has manifested, and her existence is

⁷² Libellus 7.

⁷³ Libellus 107.

⁷⁴ Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, p. 47.

⁷⁵ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, pp. 241-242.

⁷⁶ Murray, *The New Wine*, p. 25.

⁷⁷ Tugwell, Simon, O.P. “Introduction” in *Early Dominicans*, p. 26.

proof of the truth of her theology.”⁷⁸ Recognizing her littleness and powerlessness, she has nothing to fall back on but the grace of God, and she is clear that the good that happens in and through her life is a fruit of this grace.⁷⁹ Thomas Halik comments: “Thérèse – fully in the spirit of St. Paul’s letters – taught the need to accept with joy and thankfulness one’s own weakness as a space that God’s kindness and mercy may enter (while haughty virtue refuses admittance).”⁸⁰ A person who is conscious of the power and primacy of grace, that the initiative is always on God’s side, can freely and happily accept his or her own poverty and even come to love it. The one who is poor is the one who is open to receive.

Voluntary poverty

At a time where spiritual leaders were teaching believers to collect, count, and carefully record their good deeds, Thérèse firmly rejected that sort of accounting: I count nothing. I simply do everything out of love – and if I then stand empty-handed and utterly poor in the ranks of those who collected, counted and recorded their merits, isn’t that, after all, the poverty that Christ speaks about in the Sermon of the Mount: Blessed are the poor?⁸¹

Thérèse thus chooses to be poor, not only through her vow of poverty, but in a radical way, refusing to count or hold on to anything for herself. Voluntary poverty, that is, not just a state of facts accepted, but freely chosen poverty, was an important part of Dominic’s vision, and it continued to mark the authentic Dominican tradition:

Imitation of Christ, humility, dispossession, freedom: these are the themes St. Thomas stresses in speaking of apostolic poverty. There is no doubt that he drew these concepts from his own Order, and from the example of Dominic, the man whom the witnesses at the process of canonization were wont to call “a lover of poverty” (Bologna, 17)⁸²

For Dominic and his followers, voluntary poverty was the mark of authenticity for their preaching. The movements they were confronting were, in part, reactions to a decadent Church, and one side of Dominic’s mission was to restore the true image of the Church to them: The Bride of Christ, poor and meek, like her Bridegroom.⁸³

Mendicancy

Absolutely essential to Dominican identity is mendicancy. The friars were not to have any possessions, but were to live of the grace of God and the generosity of those they preached to. It is a witness to great trust in Providence and a special way of imitating Jesus, the itinerant preacher who had nowhere to lay his head (Matt 8:20), who emptied himself and became poor for our sakes (Ph 2:7; 2 Co 8:9).

This mendicancy has a practical side to it: one is freer to be on the move. But it also has to do with humility, it has to do with grace, and so has a spiritual dimension too. It is linked to the

⁷⁸ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, p. 354.

⁷⁹ Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, pp. 266-267.

⁸⁰ Halik, *Patience*, p. 32.

⁸¹ Halik, *Patience*, p. 33.

⁸² Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, p. 154.

⁸³ Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, pp. 40; 138-144.

state of the human being before God and our relationship with God in prayer, and therefore marks the Dominican tradition of prayer in a particular way. Prayer is above all placing oneself before God in simplicity, receptivity and expectancy. “We are mendicants firstly before God”⁸⁴ writes Vivian Boland O.P., coming close to another brother of the Augustinian tradition, who might have seen in Thérèse of Lisieux a sister in spirit, and whose last words include the statement: “We are beggars, this is true.”⁸⁵

Simplicity

Say “simplicity” to a Dominican, and you may easily get a reference to the *Prima pars* of Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*, question three on divine simplicity. Simplicity is a word with many meanings, and while Thomas here focusses on the doctrine that God is not composed of parts, there is more to God than just that – and the *Angelic Doctor* himself would be among the first to agree. That God is simple may also mean that God is uncomplicated. The call to reflect God’s being could therefore be said to include an invitation to become less complicated.

Paul Murray is one of several authors who often refer to the simplicity inherent in the Dominican tradition of prayer. He writes:

*When, over the years, Dominicans have found themselves confronted with detailed methods and techniques of meditation, and with long lists of instructions of what to do in meditation and what not to do, their reaction has almost always been the same: they instinctively feel that something has gone wrong.*⁸⁶

Thérèse, for her part, reacted in a similar way:

*Many times when I read certain treatises where perfection is described as if it were surrounded with untold hindrances and endless illusions, my poor little mind quickly wearies. I close the learned book that gives me a splitting headache and a dried up heart... Luckily the Kingdom of Heaven consists of many mansions; for I should never arrive there if there were only those whose description I cannot understand and the entrances to which appear impassable.*⁸⁷

Prayer for her is “an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy.” Prayer expands her soul and unites her to Jesus.⁸⁸ It is not hard for a Dominican to recognise the prayer of Dominic, as described in the early sources,⁸⁹ in this. Dominic prayed with all that he was, body and soul, and his prayer was more often than not simply an overflowing of what was in his heart.⁹⁰ It was simple, both in the sense that it was not conducted after a complicated method, and in the sense that there was no pretence – Dominic stood in front of God as he was, presenting what preoccupied him at the moment.

⁸⁴ Boland, Vivian, O.P., “Initial Formation: Between Postmodernity and New Evangelisation”, <http://www.dominicans.ca/Documents/articles/Boland1.html> (September 5th 2018).

⁸⁵ Martin Luther, quoted in Ryan, Fáinche, *Christian Anthropology*, ed. by John Littleton, Series: Theology for Today, 8, 2 vols. (Dublin: The Priory Institute, 2012), I, p. 40.

⁸⁶ Murray, *The New Wine*, p. 9.

⁸⁷ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, 57.

⁸⁸ Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, p. 242.

⁸⁹ “The Nine Ways of Prayer of Saint Dominic”, in *Early Dominicans*, pp. 94-103.

⁹⁰ Cf. Murray, *The New Wine*, p. 11 and Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, p. 247.

As the reader will have noticed by now, the themes of this essay tend to be interwoven, and one will not be surprised, therefore, to find that simplicity is closely connected, not only with poverty, but with truth and humility as well. Moreover, united with charity, it leads us to freedom and joy in Christ. “Simplicity lies in the free joy of a brother who has given up any obsession with his own progress or backsliding to keep his eyes fixed on the light of Christ.”⁹¹ And in the words of Saint Thomas: “the necessary result of the love of charity is joy; since every lover rejoices at being united to the beloved... the effect of charity is joy.”⁹²

Freedom and Joy

The Fundamental Constitution of the Order of Preachers reminds us that the Order’s laws “do not bind under sin, so that the brethren may wisely embrace them ‘not like slaves under the law, but like freemen established under grace’”⁹³ just as Thérèse, according to Balthasar, sees the Carmelite battle for self-conquest, not as an end in itself, but “a means towards the one important goal: readiness for God’s service.”⁹⁴

Precisely by this code Dominic freed his sons from an evil culpability and ensured the healthy relationship of the religious to his Rule. The object of religious life was not to have people forever feeling guilty, but to allow them to live by a law of liberty and “find their happiness in practicing it” (see James 1:25).⁹⁵

Bedouelle here shows that Dominic had the same concern Jesus had for His disciples: that following Him and keeping His word, freed by the truth, they should have life to the full and a lasting and perfect joy (cf. John 8:32; 10:10; 15:11). Dominic himself was known for his joyful attitude,⁹⁶ and Murray claims that among the words that will “take us no small distance in our understanding of Dominican life and Dominican spirituality”, is the word “happiness”.⁹⁷ He then goes on to show how joy and even laughter is a recurrent theme in the lives and writings of many Dominicans through the times: Jordan of Saxony, Catherine of Siena, Margaret Ebner, the Rhineland Mystics, and even the somewhat serious-looking Thomas Aquinas, “the happy teacher”.⁹⁸

This Gospel joy does not exclude pain and difficulties, as Dominic himself witnesses to. His joy was a joy “in tribulation”.⁹⁹ But it is nonetheless a real joy. In the same vein, Thérèse, despite her inner trials and her physical suffering, affirms:

Life is not sad! On the contrary, it is very gay. If you were to say, “This exile is very sad”, I should understand you. It is a mistake to give the name of life to something that must end. One should give that beautiful name to the things of heaven, to that

⁹¹ Schutz, Roger, *Parable of Community*, trans. Emily Chisholm and the Brothers (Oxford: A. L. Mowbray & Co. Ltd, 1980), p. 30.

⁹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 70, a. 3. Quoted in Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation: Gaudete et exsultate* 122.

⁹³ LCM: Fundamental Constitution of the Order VI.

⁹⁴ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, p. 152.

⁹⁵ Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, p. 113.

⁹⁶ *Libellus* 103-104.

⁹⁷ Murray, *The New Wine*, p. 45.

⁹⁸ Murray, *The New Wine*, pp. 45-77.

⁹⁹ Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic*, p. 96.

*which knows not death; and since we enjoy them even in this world, life is not sad but gay, very gay!*¹⁰⁰

Joy and a sense of humour run through her writings and the words collected by others, and while the younger Thérèse had a great desire for suffering, she gradually matured into the understanding that she might just as well offer to God her joys and delights. The important thing is to seek God's will, do everything out of love, and hold nothing back.¹⁰¹

Conclusion: No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid

It has not been my intention to rob the Carmelites of the glory of having produced “the greatest saint of modern times”¹⁰², nor to water down my own and my fellow Dominicans' sense of identity. Speculations around the extent to which the “great” Teresa's Dominican advisors, confessors and friends influenced the spirituality of her reformed Carmel-communities lie outside the scope of this essay, and I am even ready to concede that my interpretation of Thérèse's texts reveals more about the Dominican who read them than of the Carmelite who wrote them.

My suggestion, rather, is that since both Dominic and Thérèse were drinking deep from the same source of living water, namely the Gospel, it should not surprise us that there are points of contact and shared insights between the two. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11). Both were raised up by God at a particular time and place in the Church's history, conformed to the image of Christ through contemplation of Him, to help their fellow Christians recover the freshness of the Gospel message.

Armed with the sword of the Spirit, that is the word of God (Ep 6:17) – they both had the habit of carrying on their persons the Gospel and the Letters of Saint Paul¹⁰³ – with prayer and the total gift of themselves, Dominic and Thérèse became channels of God's grace for the Church and the world of their time and for subsequent generations. They leave us with the challenge to hear afresh the voice of their Master and ours, and respond to His call by becoming in our turn teachers of truth and preachers of grace,¹⁰⁴ incarnate words of His compassion and love for the world we live in today.

*Lunden kloster, Oslo
On the feast of Saint Matthew,
September 21st 2018*

¹⁰⁰ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, p. 215.

¹⁰¹ Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, pp. 313 – 316.

¹⁰² Pope St. Pius X, quoted in Pope St. John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Divini amoris scientia*, declaring St. Thérèse a Doctor of the Universal Church.

¹⁰³ “The Canonization Process of Saint Dominic” in *Early Dominicans*, p. 75. Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, p. 83.

¹⁰⁴ These titles, *doctor veritatis, praedicator gratiae*, are given to Dominic in the antiphon *O Lumen Ecclesiae*.