

The Dominican Charism: What for? Exploring Implications

Introduction – qualifying reservations – has it all been said...?

When the phone call came earlier this year inviting me to reflect on the Dominican charism at the beginning of this Symposium, I had a number of reservations. What could I say that I haven't already said before? What could I say that *you* haven't heard or read before; and, above all, what could I say that might possibly be *useful for the particular purposes of this Symposium*. These reservations were heightened, I must further acknowledge, by this other consideration: there may be reasons for some entities choosing to go the way of a separate PJP, but up until now, and in our circumstances, I haven't heard any *definitively persuasive* arguments that this would *necessarily* be the best way to go in the longer term – except under certain circumstances.

That aside, in relation to charism, I had yet a further reservation. Haven't the Sisters and Brother who preceded me in the earlier Symposiums already said it all? To mention the most recent of these, I would like to re-visit what Mary Britt said last year, because I believe it goes to the heart of the matter, and I'd like to draw out the implications a little more later. Quoting Schillebeeckx, Mary noted that "Dominican spirituality is only valid in so far as it takes up the story of Jesus and brings it up to date in its own way." There, surely, lies its well-spring!

Mary went on to identify important values emphases in the Dominican story, as reflected in the lives of noted Dominicans. She then gave an account of how those values found expression in the Constitutions intended to guide Dominican Sisters in their educational ministry in this country throughout the twentieth century. If I were to ask you to name, off the top of your head, the values words and ideals typically associated with Dominicans and Dominican education, I'd be surprised if they didn't all appear, in one form or another, on pages 4-5 of Mary's paper.¹

[What would you say...?]

In addition, the outline of a formation program in the educational values cherished by Dominicans is also implied on page 5 of Mary's paper. I quote: "For these principles to underpin what happens in the classroom, a coherent and explicit understanding of those principles is required at all levels of the school structure." These ideas might be expressed in other ways, but as far as the governance and conduct of schools is concerned, there is surely little to add on the matter of principles and values that hasn't already been *said* and *heard before*.

Further, isn't it the case that you yourselves, and your predecessors *have been working* for a good number of years on *implementing* those values in every aspect of school operation? Yet I think everybody can sense that this is a watershed time, in part because of the situation of the sponsoring

¹ Mary Britt OP, "Stewardship in the Dominican Tradition", Dominican Education Council Symposium, Sydney, 15 August, 2008.

Dominican communities. In fact, clarifying assumptions about this would probably be a necessary pre-condition for making the best decisions for the future. That is, on present indications, is it assumed that the Dominican Congregations /Province will, or will not be *in existence*, in an *adequately functioning* manner, in 5 years, 10 years from now? In light of that, what best to do, and how and why to do it?

Whatever path is being contemplated concerning the schools, it would be important, not only to take the long view, but to see if the Dominican charism itself has anything to offer in guiding the choices ahead.

Clarifying meanings: Dominican charism or spirit : what do we mean by the words

What can I say, then, in relation to *the Dominican charism or tradition*, that might be useful in shedding light on the subject, when so much excellent material around the theme is already on record? And what do we actually mean when we talk about the Dominican charism, or tradition, or identity, spirit, ethos? Do we use that adjective, 'Dominican', rather vaguely and loosely? Have we, through the attrition of passing time, emptied it somewhat of its essential meaning? I'd be prepared to place a fairly high bet on getting as many different answers from as many different Dominicans as you cared to ask about what they mean by these words. This could be not only because those who speak or write on this topic often do so with different degrees of comprehensiveness. It could also be because they are talking about *very different approaches*. It may be useful, therefore, to sketch out a kind of site map of the topic to see things in context. I will say more on Dominic below, but for now, we can just note the obvious, namely, that the origin of the charism and tradition lies in the graced life of Dominic himself. But we can then go on to talk about the Dominican charism, or character from the point of view of *how sisters, nuns and friars* in their communal settings are, ideally, meant to *live it out*; we can talk about what the charism means for *Dominican Laity*, and we can talk about the *qualities and values that ideally mark the ministries* of Dominicans, or of institutions under their auspices. Hence, written material on the Dominican charism or identity comes from many angles. For instance, a number of twentieth century friars wrote about the *institutional structures and functions* that were distinctive of the early Dominicans; others focused more on what were *distinctive Dominican theological stances*, for example on questions of nature and grace. Yet others look at the actual *lives of Dominican women and men*, identifying the qualities and priorities that link them by family likeness to Dominic, Catherine and others. **Would it be true to say that in the school setting, while telling the stories of Dominic, Catherine, the pioneer Sisters and so on, we are more accustomed to thinking about charism or spirit in terms of ideals and qualities that pertain to educational content, relationships and methodologies?** This Dominican 'thing' does indeed have many dimensions.

What view can I take?

It seems that to understand or appreciate anything properly, and particularly a thing as mercurial as **charism** or **tradition**, it is helpful to try to see it from at least two perspectives: firstly, to see it *in its wider*

context, as part in relation to the whole from which it has been generated. Secondly, it is even more important to *see deeply into its original essence*, to perceive its inner identity and purpose. I have wondered, then, if an approach to Dominican charism or tradition focussed on these two aspects – **sources within context** and **essence**, with a third brief consideration of **formation and some implications** – could be useful in the present context?

1 Ultimate sources of the Dominican tradition and how it came to be

First, then, a wide-angle view on the ultimate sources of the Dominican tradition and how it came to be. [But first, a clarification. So far, I have quite deliberately used charism, ethos, spirit, tradition, spirituality more or less interchangeably – as they very often are in casual talk. But let me now be more specific. For present purposes, I am considering charism as the particular constellation of gifts and action manifest in Dominic, and the other words as descriptive of the spiritual climate, the ideal community characteristics or the values and qualities of ministry that resulted thereafter.] So, whence the Dominican character or spirit? It will hardly have escaped your attention that *the principles and values we routinely talk about as elements of the Dominican ethos*, that is, all those ideals we recalled above from Mary's paper, are not *exclusive* to Dominicans. It is true, however, that a number of these values became *particularly associated with Dominicans* because of our history. In the early Dominican days of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, values and principles such as the unity of the human person as body-soul, the radical goodness of all creation (matter as well as spirit), the importance of sound scholarship in the pursuit of truth, breadth of thought and openness to new knowledge, respect for individual dignity and personal responsibility that led to community democracy, and so on, *were particularly associated with Dominicans*.² This was because it was Dominic and his followers who were in the vanguard of asserting or re-asserting these values as integral to the Christian way of life over against the Albigensian (Catharist) dualism rampant at the time (all matter was said to be evil); it was at the time the scholarly and committed Dominicans who differed sharply from the poorly qualified clergy; and it *was* a specifically Dominican innovation to govern its own community democratically, in marked contrast to the authoritarian mode of abbots and abbesses in monasteries. And it *was* the Dominicans Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas who so eminently epitomised the then-new ideal of persistent study in service of the gospel ministry, an innovation introduced by Dominic himself.³ [This focus on the centrality of study in Dominican life is clearly reflected to this day in the Constitutions of both Friars and Sisters, as can be seen in an Appendix to this paper.] And this study was not to be study of just sacred texts: it was Albert, vibrantly aware of the "fascinating traces of God" to be found in all of God's creation, who

²Note: It is obviously the friars who set the tone, since it was not until much later that apostolic Congregations of Dominican women were able to engage in broader, including intellectual activities. Nevertheless, all branches of the Dominican Family now claim the whole tradition.

³ Simon Tugwell, ed. & trsn., *Albert and Thomas* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 289.

said that “the whole world is theology for us”.⁴ It was Thomas, building upon Albert, who opened up and reconciled Greek classical knowledge (hitherto a little suspect) with Catholic thinking,⁵ who said that to disobey your own reason was like disobeying God, since the light of reason is a reflection of divine truth;⁶ and it was Thomas who taught that grace affirms, not limits human nature, so that everything in human life that is *good, true and beautiful* is to flourish and be celebrated. And it was the mystical theologian, Meister Eckhart, “one of the great spiritual teachers of all time”⁷, who taught a way to God (learnt in part, it seems, through spiritual dialogue with Dominican nuns and others⁸) not as a dry, abstract and cerebral exercise, but as something to be lived “with fire, intensity and passion”.⁹ So yes, at the beginning of Dominican history, some of these values were particularly *associated with* and *manifest in* Dominicans, and strengthened by them. But actually they were values *already inherent in the Christian tradition* from earlier centuries. What the early Dominicans were intent upon living, witnessing and proclaiming, in the context of thirteenth century heresy and generally inadequate clergy, was, quite simply, **authentic Christian faith and life**, for the sake of the people’s temporal and eternal well-being; and the nuns of Prouille (who, by the way, had been in existence before being joined by some converts from heresy¹⁰) were intent upon aiding and abetting the friars through prayer and the support of hospitality.¹¹ In fact, the little settlement of people – laity, nuns, friars – clustered around the incipient Prouille foundation is characterised by the Dominican historian Vicaire as an embryonic “**Catholic missionary centre**”.¹²

And here I want to note again, and build upon, this very same principle that Mary Britt highlighted in her paper last year. What is it, Mary asked, that we are “called to cherish and to pass on?” Her answer captures the essence of the educational mission of the schools (I paraphrase Mary slightly): drawing from the wellsprings of Jesus of the gospels, a formation in Christian faith and living enlightened by sound scholarship and marked by fidelity to truth and openness to new learning.¹³ *This* was the kind of Catholic educational program which brought our Irish pioneer Sisters to the ends of this earth a hundred and forty years ago. And though, as Mary noted, we may never have fully realised our ideals, this has been the purpose of the schools under our watch. It is our hope that these schools, whatever wider functions they may exercise in **a re-**

⁴ Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas*, 35.

⁵ J. Maritain, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1933), 39-40.

⁶ Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas*, 264.

⁷ C. Smith, *The Way of Paradox – Spiritual Life as taught by Meister Eckhart* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987), ix.

⁸ O. Davies, *God Within – The Mystical Tradition of Northern Europe* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1988), 109.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁰ M.-H. Vicaire, trans. K. Pond, *Saint Domini His Life and His Times* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1964), 122.

¹¹ Marie-Humbert Vicaire, ed. Peter Lobo OP, *The Genius of St Dominic* (Seminary Hill, Nagpur: Dominican Publications, 1990), 9.

¹² Vicaire, *St Dominic His Life and Times*, 119.

¹³ Britt, “Stewardship...”, 4.

visioned future,¹⁴ will continue to serve the authentic Catholic Christian education and development of young people, maintaining and developing the values that we have tried to hold before ourselves and our co-workers. But let us be under no illusions about this: these ideals that Dominicans have treasured are nothing other than the best of Catholic Christian principles and values. Are there not implications here?

Characteristics of Catholicism – source of Dominican-cherished values

That there be no doubt about this (the source of our values), let me conclude this part of my reflection with a summary of qualities widely recognised as those of authentic Catholicism. And a word of qualification. As those who write of these things take care to point out – and my main sources are Gerald O’Collins and Mario Farrugia,¹⁵ Richard McBrien,¹⁶ Avery Dulles¹⁷ and Langdon Gilkey¹⁸ (the last a Protestant theologian) – these qualities are not necessarily exclusive to Catholicism, though one source claims that some are “uniquely Catholic”, and there will be many Catholic communities deficient in these qualities. Nevertheless, in their particular configuration, these values and principles are acknowledged to be both characteristic and distinctive of universal Catholicism. Clearly, they are interrelated, because they flow from the source belief that God made the whole of creation, and it is good! The summary that follows is an amalgam of the sources mentioned above. Beyond the foundational Jesus-centredness, and the Petrine ministry, *these* are the characteristics of our Catholic heritage:

- The dignity of each human person and the goodness of all creation – and flowing from this the principles of sacramentality and mediation. That is, God is present in and works through the whole creation: people and places, communities and events, the whole natural order, signs and symbols.
- Radical openness to all truth wherever found and to every good value.
- Rationality – that is, insistence that the most highly developed rational reflection – study – be brought to bear upon the divine mysteries within the whole creation.
- Breadth and balance of thought and action (and according to Dulles, length, depth and height as well) – that is, a both/and, not an either/or approach to life: hence, nature *and* grace, reason and faith, law and Gospel, Scripture and tradition, faith and works, authority and freedom; yet avoiding the extremes of fundamentalism, moralism, dogmatism, legalism.
- The sense of peoplehood – community rather than individualism, inclusivity embracing all races, all cultures, all times – universality.

¹⁴ See reference to Ranson article in Mark O’Brien, “Some Thoughts Towards a Dominican Idea of Leadership”, Dominican Education Council Symposium, 2007, 5.

¹⁵ Gerald O’Collins & Mario Farrugia, *Catholicism: The Story of Catholic Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 367-380.

¹⁶ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (North Blackburn: CollinsDove, 1994), 8-17, 1190-1201.

¹⁷ Avery Robert Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 1-11.

¹⁸ Langdon Gilkey, *Catholicism Confronts Modernity: A Protestant View* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 17-18, 20-22.

- *Caritas* as characteristic of community, where *caritas* is explained as a sense of humanity and grace in communal life that “overflows into a love of life, a celebration of the body, and a certain tolerance for human sinfulness”.¹⁹

A truly magnificent heritage!

What do you think? Do these characteristics of Catholicism sound very much like those ideals typically associated with what we call the Dominican ethos? And why wouldn't they? Dominicans are first of all Catholics, and we have no ownership of human and Christian values.

Are we really justified, then, in talking about Dominican values?

Is there nothing nowadays that is distinctively Dominican, except the details of our history? Does the small stream of so-called Dominican spirituality in the end just blend back into the general river of Catholicism, whence it came? What about all those articles and books on the topic? Our *story* is indeed a story to be proud of and to give thanks for (though we don't forget the shadow side). But does the memory of so many brilliant saints and scholars in our long history sometimes let us get carried away with ourselves? Vicaire *has* noted the megalomania and prejudices of earlier Dominicans.²⁰ And it is true that no less an authority than Edward Schillebeeckx has cautioned that “a definitive all-round definition of Dominican spirituality cannot be given” because it is lived differently in different times, cultures and circumstances.²¹ This highlights, I think, a very important point. The Dominican charism exists only as embodied in a life. Hence, while you can gather stories of what members of the Dominican family have done here or there, you cannot put material in a book or folder and say definitively, this is it! (i.e. the charism.)

And yet I do believe there is something we have inherited that we can humbly call the Dominican ethos or spirit, though it can never be captured in words – any more than you can capture a fragrance in words. In wrestling with this question over the years, I have settled, for now, on this preferred metaphor for understanding this elusive reality: Is it something like what we encounter in the world of music? The great composers work with the same range of major and minor keys, the same notes, tones and even instruments. But after just a few bars, it is possible to say, for example: that is definitely Beethoven, and not Mozart, and so on. It is the indefinable yet unique blend of elements, and extensive exposure to the expression of it, that enables us to recognise this difference. So it is, I think, with the Dominican ethos.²² There are implications here, too, for the passing on of it.

¹⁹ Gilkey quoted in McBrien, *Catholicism*, 1198-1199.

²⁰ Vicaire, *Saint Dominic His Life and Times*, viii.

²¹ P Zagano & T. McGonigle, *The Dominican Tradition* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2006), xii.

²² G. Kelly, “Dominican Spirituality and Ethos – and Some Implications for Schools,” 11-12. Paper given at Dominican Education Committee gathering, *Weaving our Dominican Story into the Contemporary Tapestry*. Siena College, Melbourne. 11 October, 1996.

2 That leaves the question of **the essence of the original Dominican charism**, and I would now like to focus on that. It seems important to do this because, behind all the innovative structures, the new emphasis on study for ministry, the distinctive theological stances, behind all the values and principles, lies the origin, namely, the gifts of nature and grace given to Dominic, and his expression of these gifts within the world around him. That, and that alone, strictly speaking, is what can be called the Dominican charism, and all the rest are aspects of that. Only in Alice's wonderland is it possible to perceive a grin without the cat!

What, then, was the *character* of Dominic's inner spirit, what was the nature of those "secret heart stirrings"²³ prompted in him by the Holy Spirit through long hours of prayer, silence and acute awareness of the needs of his world. Can we get through the welter of historical details to be confident about seeing the real Dominic, and what 'made him tick'?

Problems about Dominican history

To be sure, for a long time there were serious problems about Dominican history! Not through lack of books about Dominic, but because of a string of "corruptor[s] of Dominican historiography" in the first centuries after him. Vicaire, possibly the single greatest authority on Dominic's life, tells us that one of these 'corruptors' produced a number of so-called facts about Dominican history previously unheard of, facts which he claimed to know by revelation! To muddy the pool further, there was what Vicaire called the "megalomania of ... official historiographies", as well as the problem of correctly interpreting medieval documents. All of this added to the "heavy mass of errors and confusions" which left Dominicans stuck in the "rut of prejudices arising from *esprit de corps*".²⁴ [These corrupt sources haven't been entirely without their value! They have been a wonderful source of quizz questions for the game of 'Dominican Trivial Pursuit', a game concocted by me and offered as after-dinner entertainment at the last round-table dinner in Pasadena for St Dominic's day a couple of years ago!]

And by the way, forget about Jane of Aza's dream of bearing in her womb a dog with a torch in its mouth, the stories of bees alighting on Dominic's honeyed lips, of a light on his forehead. These identical stories had centuries earlier served to enhance in turn the reputations of St Bernard, St Julian, St Ambrose, St Isidore and St John Chrysostom!²⁵

In fact, the historical problems about identifying the real Dominic have been not unlike those of the historical quest for the real Jesus. But fortunately, besides the legends, there are also authentic documents which scholars over the past century have subjected to lengthy critical investigation.²⁶ These studies now provide us with reliable information about just who Dominic was.

²³ Vicaire, *Saint Dominic His Life and Times*, 115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, vii-viii.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21, 449 (footnotes 112-114).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, viii-x.

The essence of Dominic's charism

Dominic has often been described as a remarkably balanced personality, manifesting an unusually wide range of gifts and abilities, and his life bears that out. Yet it seems that those who lived with him had no difficulty in identifying his *most notable characteristic*: he was a person of *deep and constant prayer*. The heart of his prayer was Jesus Christ, and Dominic's entire life project was, not simply to *pray* to Christ for those whose salvation was considered endangered by the heresy, but *to be like Jesus, spending his life and energy going about teaching* and seeking out all who needed 'saving'.²⁷ And this was Dominic's other definitive trait. His great passion for the *salvation of all people without distinction* of gender, class or religion, "powerfully impressed everyone around him, especially [we are told] those of his closest associates who were in his confidence".²⁸ The words used by his contemporaries to describe this passion give us a sense of how pronounced it was: "... a greater zeal for the salvation of all humankind than anyone else I have ever met", said one; he was "ready if need be to die" for this purpose, said another. And Jordan of Saxony confirms that "there was in his heart a *remarkable* and almost *incredible* desire for the salvation of all".²⁹ The chief means by which Dominic intended to mediate this salvation was by preaching the saving word of God, just as Jesus had done.³⁰ Yet in the face of acute suffering and need, his priority was clear: *practical action for the destitute trumped study and preaching*, as we see in Dominic's response to the enslaved and the starving. We all know the story: to obtain premises for a food distribution centre in time of famine, he sold everything thing he had – furniture, books, even his precious manuscripts: *I will not study on dead skins, when [people] are dying of hunger*.³¹ Together with this zeal for all people without distinction, Dominic possessed a great gift for personal relating: he was at ease with everyone, of whatever situation or status, and we are told "he had the proper word for each of them".³²

So this is Dominic: a person of *constant prayer, committed to the salvation of all* through preaching the saving Word of God, pastorally sensitive to each person..

Yet it seems there was an all important qualification to Dominic's goal of 'saving souls'. "His own personal vocation [Vicaire tells us] was something *more definite still*: to bring the gospel to...peoples **who had not yet received it**"³³ – that is, those **in greatest need** of it. This was Dominic's first and deepest impulse. For a time he "renounced" his strong attraction towards this other missionary apostolate in favour of the mission to the Albigensians.³⁴ But the "most deeply-rooted of all Dominic's ideas, his earliest vocation, the aspiration which he had the most tenaciously cultivated within his heart", which he kept alive within

²⁷ Vicaire, *The Genius of St Dominic*, 49.

²⁸ Ibid., 26

²⁹ Ibid., 26-27.

³⁰ Ibid., 5.

³¹ Vicaire, *Saint Dominic*, 29-30.

³² Vicaire, *The Genius of St Dominic*, 117.

³³ Vicaire, *The Genius of St Dominic*, 5.

³⁴ Ibid., 124.

himself until his death, and what he fully intended to do as soon as he had finished founding the Dominican Order, was to go out, in the manner of a “passing wayfarer”, an itinerant, to the frontiers of his world to preach the **saving word to those who had not yet heard it.**³⁵ As a recent Master of the Order, Vincent, of inspiring memory wrote: “Dominic was not a man of routine, repeating what was always done... He...went beyond what was usual and well-known – [he] did not settle for quiet situations or well-trod paths”.³⁶ Dominic was first and foremost a missionary and, as historians point out, the Order he founded was “the first strictly missionary Order in the Church”.³⁷ Our pioneer Sisters, and some who came later, certainly embodied this.

Changed notions of salvation

In reflecting on what all this might mean for us in the 21st century, we could perhaps all learn from Dominic the importance of being true to one’s own deepest calling, whatever that is. Beyond that, we may also need to make appropriate re-interpretations of the notion of ‘salvation’, as well as other time-bound details. **[What does the word salvation mean for you today ?]** Naturally, we can never get back behind the Enlightenment to understand fully the medieval mindset, but we can note some of their major concerns. In Dominic’s time, the central concern apparently was not whether God existed, but how salvation was to be achieved. This was a mere century or so after Anselm of Canterbury had developed his then-new theology of satisfaction (Jesus, the God-man, had to die on the cross to make recompense to God for human sins). The cross and suffering in union with Jesus were therefore central in Christian piety (we can note Dominic’s attitude in this regard). The important thing for salvation was to hear Jesus’ message of salvation, to repent of sin, and for individuals to appropriate this salvation (to be experienced largely in the hereafter) through the sacramental life of the church, especially penance and Eucharist.³⁸ Today, in the wake of Vatican II, salvation is understood much more comprehensively. While not forgetting its transcendent and eternal dimensions, and the centrality of Jesus Christ, God’s salvation is also to be experienced within *the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties*³⁹ of this earthly life. As a recent expert put it: “Salvation is as coherent, broad, and deep as the exigencies of human existence”.⁴⁰

We might also note that preaching in our day, for Dominicans, also takes on much wider meanings.

Bearing in mind these adjustments for the 21st century, can we summarise the qualities, the spiritual DNA, of Dominic’s charism thus?

³⁵ Ibid., 45, 6.

³⁶ Vincent de Couesnongle OP, Master, “Who are my ‘Cumans’?”, Letter to the Order, May 1976, 1.

³⁷ Vicaire, *The Genius of St Dominic*, 25.

³⁸ E.g. Bernard McGinn, “Christ as Savior in the West” in *Christian Spirituality Origins to the Twelfth Century*, eds. B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff, J. Leclercq (London: SCM Press, 1989), 253-58. See also David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 394-5.

³⁹ *Gaudium et spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican II, 1965.

⁴⁰ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 400.

In a communal setting, a life totally committed to communion with Jesus Christ, totally given for the salvation of others, through intelligent and loving preaching, and, faithful to the end to his own deepest calling, ready to go where the need was greatest.

Therein lies the answer to the question in the title to this paper: The Dominican charism – and hence the Dominican Family – exists for God's saving mission.

In discerning future governance models, then, would not the primary guiding light from Dominic's charism simply be the question of what arrangements would best serve the interests of God's mission?

And if we wish to properly apply the adjective 'Dominican' to anything or anyone, wouldn't we need to be sure that the thing – the institution, the person, the ministry – in some way reflects traces of the deepest identity of **Dominic's** charism?

Alas! On this view, who would dare use the adjective, 'Dominican', constrained as we are by limitations, inward and outward. But take heart! There is a most gracious custom in our tradition – those of us who received the Habit in times past will remember it – whereby the candidate about to join the Order is asked by the Provincial or presider representing the community, *What do you seek?* And the answer: *The mercy of God and yours!* That too – the receiving and giving of mercy – is a treasured tradition among us. *My power is made perfect in weakness* (2 Cor. 12:9)!

Possible Implications for Formation – or stewardship?

Finally, the question of formation. There may still be many unknowns about a PJP – feasibility, costs, finding appropriate personnel [though Frank Morrissey's paper provides a comprehensive check list for every possible contingency⁴¹]. There is too the question of whether Rome would be likely to approve a PJP proposal (I've heard Rome is not too keen on approving a proliferation of small entity PJPs), not to mention Frank Morrissey's unsettling warning that "it is quite probable that within five or ten years we might have to go back to the drawing boards".⁴²

Be that as it may, if a significant part of the desire to have a separate PJP is to pass on something of the Dominican spirit, what are the implications for formation – or stewardship? Would further clarification of terms, content, process be useful here too? I have no answers – just questions!

Would it be useful to distinguish between various senses of formation. There is, firstly, the pattern of Christian formation as generally understood – would not this be the closest model for formation in the Dominican charism? This (Christian formation), as you know, usually involves study of written sources, prayerful reflection and integration into one's existing

⁴¹ Frank Morrissey, "Public Juridic Persons in the Church", February 19-20, 2009.

⁴² Morrissey, "Public Juridic Persons...", 1.

life experience, and most importantly, *spiritual absorption through immersion in a living community* of the tradition – though even this may not be enough, as experience shows. In fact, isn't this perhaps the greatest challenge and a top priority in our highly secular society – how to awaken embers and fan the flame of deep Christian commitment – while avoiding fundamentalism, dogmatism and so on? And are not Catholic schools on the front lines in this regard? You know better than I the difficulties faced regularly by many school leaders in providing that living Christian community throughout the schools, when, notwithstanding the high calibre of some outstanding staff, it is sometimes hard to find and employ a critical mass of teachers manifesting that commitment. A retired Anglican bishop, lamenting this inability to pass on our true Christian myth to current generations, wonders if this is related to western society's failure to nurture the mystical dimensions of our consciousness.⁴³ Diana Woods, in her 2006 presentation, noted this too. Diana reminded us that we are all "called to be midwives to this new consciousness" and that "an appreciation of mysticism is integral to mission".⁴⁴ It does seem, anyway, that this is a priority for any and all Catholic schools: how to provide *Christian* formation programs that generate the fire that ignites and maintains living conversion - which comes in the end only from some kind of *experienced encounter with the Divine*.

A second more general sense of formation is that used by Frank Morrissey to cover instruction of possible PJP people in the requirements of assuming canonical and legal responsibilities of school governance.⁴⁵ And could we say there is a third area which has to do simply with *learning about a tradition* that might be called enculturation or stewardship?

In light of all the foregoing: if the **substance** of what Dominicans value is none other than the authentic Catholic Christian tradition, and presuming **those invited onto governing boards, would already be deeply formed in and living this Christian tradition**, given further that a religious family's **charism** (unlike simple history) cannot be learned just from books or programs, but ordinarily requires links with a living community visibly manifesting that tradition - what happens if and when this living community no longer exists? Granted, no one knows what the future holds, but on present indications, for how much longer will the present Congregations be functioning entities?

The first team or two of governing people could draw on the still-existing community, but, as with senior school leaders, people come and go. We have had 5 principals, and other senior changes, at Cabra since the last Sister, over twenty years ago. Each one has loyally and responsibly acquired and promoted as best they could *knowledge of the Dominican story*. Then they leave and go to a school of another tradition, and so on. This is as it should be. When governing personnel, like principals, finish their term of office, who in the future provides the living link with the

⁴³ Bruce Wilson, *Reasons of the Heart* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998), viii.

⁴⁴ Diana Woods OP, "Catching Fire From Dominic's Vision", DEC Symposium 2006, 8.

⁴⁵ Frank Morrissey, 'Public Juridic Persons ...', 30 ff.

tradition? In the end, does it really matter, if the schools are being true to their Catholic Christian purpose, the mission for which they were founded?

In any case, maintaining appreciation of a school's Dominican heritage does not depend upon the establishment of a separate PJP. For evidence, just look at the websites of San Sisto in Brisbane, San Clemente in Newcastle, and the remarkable example of the thoroughly and zealously Dominican parish school in Semaphore, as well as the great interest of several other former Dominican parish primary schools in Adelaide!

The Dominican 'thing' is a precious ideal – however much we have fallen short – and it would be heartening to see a new birth of the charism – in its fullness and originality – *in new ways* – if the Holy Spirit leads. However, we do not – cannot – expect others who have not so chosen to be Dominican. And anyway, isn't the heart of the Dominican 'thing' simply to focus on God's mission? Might we, at some point, be asked to 'let go' of our Isaac?

Conclusion

In concluding, may I share with you a thought – perhaps more properly a fantasy – prompted in part by Mark O'Brien's reference in 2007 to David Ranson's suggestion that Catholic schools of the future may have more extensive functions than at present.⁴⁶

These colleges, while mostly founded in situations of great need, which continued for a good part of the twentieth century, are today all highly successful. As Mark noted, referring to David Ranson, these schools are often sought after now, not for their religious education, but for their educational quality. We may wonder, too, if their separate private status gives them a measure of social prestige attractive to many people. There can be no doubt, anyway, that these schools, with their state-of-the-art facilities, best practice administrative systems, excellent programs, and above all their high quality staff and leadership, are now far from being the most needy educational institutions. Of course, these schools have all developed excellent social justice and outreach programs for conscientising students about the ideals of service and the needs of poorer neighbours – for example, in the Philippines, Africa, Vietnam, East Timor, and with Indigenous Australians in northern South Australia.

Yet there is a high-priority educational mission in this country right now crying out for concerted attention from the best staff. That is Indigenous education in roughly the northern half of the country. With some exceptions, both government and Catholic education authorities have great difficulty attracting and retaining good staff. The thought – fantasy – was this: If these Dominican schools were to continue as a loosely-knit group under a Dominican umbrella (and even if they didn't), and while continuing their important urban mission, what if they could, from the

⁴⁶ Mark O'Brien OP, "Some Thoughts Towards a Dominican Idea of Leadership", Dominican Education Council Symposium, Sydney, 2007, 5.

fullness of their institutional capital, become a further resource at the service of mission? It could happen quite simply, without financial cost, like this: Capable and dedicated teachers in these schools, and in a position to do so, could be encouraged to give two or three years to Indigenous education in the north, offered moral support during that time, and guaranteed their positions in the southern school when they returned...

Thank you. And may the spirit of Dominic guide the process.

Gabrielle Kelly op
Darwin. 5th August 2009

APPENDIX – CENTRALITY OF STUDY IN DOMINICAN LIFE

The indispensable role of study in Dominican life is reflected in the Constitutions of both Friars and Sisters, each enshrining Dominic's vision in its own way. Most importantly, Dominicans engage in study for religious purposes: to nourish prayer, to enable activity to be more 'thoughtful'⁴⁷, to be useful to the souls of others.

The friars devote an entire chapter to the place of study in life and ministry, setting out in detail its sources, requirements and governance. Study, it says, is to be directed principally towards being useful for the souls of our neighbours. At the same time, "assiduous study nourishes contemplation" by opening "their hearts to the manifold wisdom of God" to be found in many and varied places – "... in creation, in human institutions and artifacts and in different religions"⁴⁸.

In the 1988 Australian Sisters' Constitution (commonly shared), in addition to prayer and community, study is to be "central... to our contemplation of Divine Truth". To carry out our ministry properly, according to Dominic's charism, "we need the nourishment of life-long study of the Word of God", as well as "adequate knowledge of culture and the signs of the times". Moreover, communities are to see to it that communal life is "conducive to prayer and study".⁴⁹ In addition, the Holy Cross Congregation Directory focuses on the importance of study in four different places, summed up in this article: "If our lives are to be a genuine 'search for truth' then disciplined and constant study [of the Word of God in scripture and in our world] must have a permanent place".⁵⁰

To contemplate and give to others the fruits of contemplation!

⁴⁷ Vincent de Coeunongle OP, Master of the Order, 1975

⁴⁸ Constitutions, Assumption Province, 48-49.

⁴⁹ Dominican Sisters' Constitutions, 5, n 2; 17, n 50, n 51.

⁵⁰ Holy Cross Sisters' Directory, 27, n 35. Also 21, n 5; 22, n 8; 28, n 36.

