



Engaging Aging

Aging into the Heart of Mercy

By Sister Margaret Palliser, OP

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Dominicans around the world have begun a year of celebration marking the 800th anniversary of the official approval of the Order of Preachers by Pope Honorius III in December, 1216. As I think about the rich spiritual heritage of the Dominican Family, I realize that our spirituality has much wisdom to offer to anyone looking for ways to age into a life-giving future—it has been doing so for eight centuries! Moreover, this 800th anniversary celebration coincides with that of the extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy announced by Pope Francis—a perfect backdrop for exploring what Dominican spirituality has to say about a “spirituality” of aging.

Not a portrait, but a family album

From its very beginnings, Dominican spirituality has always been focused on the Word of God—in liturgical celebration, in study and contemplation, and in the living out of the primary mission of Dominicans in the Church: to preach the gospel. To understand this spirituality of the Order of Preachers, one must look not only to the founding charism of Saint Dominic, but also to the lived legacy of his many followers. Dominic (1170-1221) did not leave great treatises or detailed instructions for his followers; rather, he modeled a *way* of preaching the gospel and left behind a community committed to preaching the good news of God’s mercy and grace.

Sister Margaret A. Palliser, a member of the Dominican Sisters of Sparkill, New York, serves on her congregation’s leadership team. Prior to her current ministry, she spent many years as a university administrator and professor of religious studies. In addition to her work in higher education, Sr. Margaret was the editor of *Living with Christ* from 2009 to 2012. She holds a Master of Music degree from Boston University and a Doctorate in Sacred Theology with a concentration in spiritual theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. A theologian, educator, liturgist, and musician, Sister Margaret feels privileged to be involved in the area of ongoing formation.



*If you are
 who you
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Catherine of Siena

Aging into the Heart of Mercy, continued

Early Dominican sources do not focus on Dominic's persona; instead, they paint a picture of a community of preachers based on the vision and ideals that Dominic left imprinted on the psyche of the community, ideals that prompted others to follow in their footsteps. The Dominican spiritual tradition will continue to evolve as long as there are Dominicans bringing to life Dominic's vision of a community of itinerant preachers responding to new currents of thought in ever-new circumstances. And as we draw on the wisdom that has shone so brightly in Dominic and in the lives of the men and women of the Order over the centuries, we can see that Dominican spirituality, including a spirituality of aging, is rooted in a firm trust in the mercy and compassion of God.

Dominican spirituality and divine mercy

Dominicans follow the example of Saint Dominic, the "preacher of grace." In his recent letter announcing the 800th Anniversary Year, the Master of the Order, Bruno Cadoré, reminds us that "preachers of the Gospel are the preachers of grace, and the preachers of grace are the preachers of the mercy of God."

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), perhaps the best known of the great Dominican intellectuals, tells us that every divine action has its roots in mercy. When we truly grasp this radical understanding of mercy as God's very self in God's care and love for creation, we can even go so far as to say that "Mercy" is the name of God in relation to creatures, an insight demonstrated in the prayer of Dominic himself.

One of the earliest descriptions of Dominic recounts 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 shrine of his compassion." According to eyewitnesses, Dominic spent

whole nights in prayer, invoking God: "My God, my Mercy, what will become of sinners?"

Dominic's focus on God's mercy continues in the spirituality of Dominicans. Damian Byrne, Master of the Order from 1983 to 1990, once told me that when he taught preaching to the student brothers in Ireland, he would tell them that there is only one rule they need to remember: "Every homily—*every* homily—must be about the mercy of God. And if one is preaching to priests or religious, that rule applies doubly because they really don't believe it!"



Sculpture of St. Dominic by Sr. Rose Marie Morris, OP, located on the grounds of Dominican Convent, Sparkill, NY

Our brother Damian's insight is one that rings true. God's mercy is so beyond our human experience of forgiveness. During this Jubilee Year of Mercy, when Pope Francis is asking us to lift up God's merciful face to the world, we might all do well to follow Dominic's lead, praying as he did, "My God, my Mercy," asking God to give us eyes of deep compassion with which to see our world so that we ourselves may continue to become reflections of divine mercy in our own situations. Moreover, as we age, we are also called to let go of our own past failures. To see with God's eye of compassion gives us the courage and peace we need to do just that.

Aging into the Heart of Mercy, continued

Preaching and elders

There's a strong link between the gospel message of salvation and the preaching of mercy—which is the heart of the gospel. Indeed, the spirit of Dominic's own preaching can be summed up in one word: compassion. To preach as a Dominican is to proclaim the tender compassion of God.

While the challenges of aging can present obstacles for many forms of ministry, preaching is certainly not one of them. Aging should never lead us to give up on preaching! So, as elders, how do we preach the good news?

A good way to explore this question is to reflect on the three “mottos” of the Order: (1) *Contemplari, et contemplata aliis tradere* – To contemplate, and to hand on to others the fruits of one's contemplation; (2) *Veritas* – Truth; (3) *Laudare, Benedicere, Praedicare* – To praise, to bless, to preach. These three mottos shed light on the fundamental mission of the Order: to preach in the spirit of Dominic, in season and out of season, no matter what our limitations may be.

To contemplate, and to hand on to others the fruits of one's contemplation

For a Dominican, the fruit of one's study and contemplation is meant to be shared. The Dominican tradition has always had great respect for the particular, personal charism of each of its members; for it is the individual Dominican's living of the mission that moves the group's charism forward. In other words, each Dominican's life is a needed chapter of the book of Dominican spirituality, critical to the evolving charism of the community. We follow the footprints of those who have gone before us, but our steps take us on our own unique path. Lived well, our lives become a light for others who will come after us. Our experience becomes a source of wisdom for others about how to live into the mystery of God.

When we reach our retirement years, we can find ourselves with more leisure for the study, prayer, and contemplation we longed for during our years of active ministry. For each of us, this is a time to ask: Do I continue to welcome and contemplate new and perhaps challenging ideas (as did Thomas Aquinas!)? Can I let go of the security of my past ways of thinking and live in the “now” in order to be Christ's presence in response to circumstances I find myself in?

Veritas ... the truth to be discovered as we age

Dominicans never cease their pursuit of truth. As we get older we are drawn more deeply into the mystery of God, and “truth” takes on a meaning beyond articulations

From left, Sparkill Dominican Sisters Ann Louise DeGennaro, Margaret Strychalski, Winifred Marie O'Halloran, Marie Angelique Dryden, Nora Healey, and Jeanne Burns



Aging into the Heart of Mercy, continued

of “objective” truth. We find ourselves returning to the most basic questions about our existence and the deepest meaning of our humanity: Who am I? What does my life mean? In the words of Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), we find ourselves called to enter the “cell of self-knowledge.”

Asking these questions as we age is not to be mistaken for a narcissistic concern with our own well-being or personal self-fulfillment; rather, the search for self-knowledge leads us to discover as Catherine did that God is at the center of our very being. The “truth” of our situation is that we have always been—and continue to be—held in the loving embrace of God’s mercy. No matter what our failings may be, we are unconditionally loved and treasured by God. As Catherine so eloquently recorded in her *Dialogue*, God tells us, “It was with providence that I created you, and when I contemplated my creature in myself, I fell in love with the beauty of my creation.”

The cell of self-knowledge becomes the place of our contemplative prayer. There we meet the God who delights in us and showers us with love. There we are truly free to be ourselves, with all of our flaws and weaknesses, apprehensions and fears. Only there, where we are who we really are, is God able to speak directly to our hearts—precisely because our hearts are laid bare of all pretense. When we are at home with ourselves “where we are,” we are most real and most ready for God’s grace to enter in and transform us.

This experience of the truth of our situation shines forth in our own ability to love and treasure others, even in the midst of the limitations that age can bring. Being free to be ourselves, we become who we are truly meant to be, beacons of God’s love and compassion for others who are also struggling to be themselves. In the words of Catherine, “If you are who you are meant to be, you will set the world ablaze.”

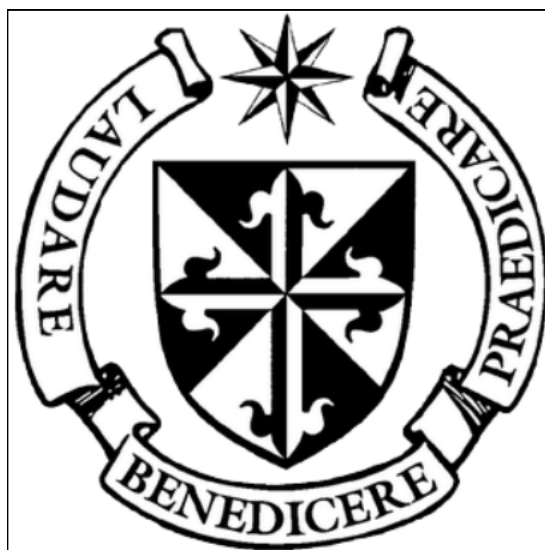
To Praise, To Bless, To Preach

Laudare – To Praise. When we come to know the truth that we are loved and blessed by God, the natural response is gratitude and praise. Each day, we are invited to ask ourselves anew, “What is my greatest cause for joy? For what am I grateful... and how shall I respond?”

In a sermon on Philippians 4:4, our Dominican brother Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) said that if the only prayer we ever make

to God in our whole life is “thank you,” it would suffice. As we age, we are encouraged to continue making that joyful prayer of thanks each and every day.

Benedicere - To Bless. For Dominicans, the ritual of profession of vows begins by asking the novice: “What do you ask?” The traditional answer is: “The mercy of God and your mercy.” In asking mercy of the community, the novice touches upon a key element of Dominican spirituality: we are called to be a blessing for the members of our communities, an incarnated “word” of mercy for one another.



Aging into the Heart of Mercy, continued

Mercy in community means that all members are offered acceptance and love without condition. Anyone who has lived in community knows that it is a lifelong challenge to be a compassionate presence to all those with whom one lives. We might even say that we are called to “grow into” the face of mercy for each other. By simply being there for each other, offering the compassion that comes with the wisdom that age brings, we can be a true blessing for our communities, giving those with whom we live the freedom to be themselves.

Praedicare - To Preach. The charism of preaching is central to Dominican identity. Each member of the Order of Preachers is called to preach according to his or her gifts. Blessed John of Fiesole (better known as Fra Angelico, 1395-1455) used his skills as an artist to bring the scriptures to life in paintings and frescoes, inspiring countless souls throughout the centuries through the eloquence of his art. We too are called to use our own unique gifts to witness to God’s mercy. How best to do this as we age? How shall we preach God’s word of compassion in our world and in our communities?

Perhaps we can take our cue from another one of Dominic’s great virtues: trust in divine providence. I think that it was Dominic’s great trust in God that gave him his characteristic joy, a joy so evident that he became known as the “joyful friar.” It was Dominic’s joy that attracted others to God—a way of preaching that we can all strive for!

How do we become gospel witnesses of joy? I believe that it is the fruit of a deep trust in the mercy of God. Trust in God gives us the courage to let go of



From left, Sparkill Dominican Sisters Miriam Joseph Schaub and Lois Liewweg recently celebrated birthdays. Both sisters are nonagenarians.

our past failures and our need to be in control as we face the autumn years of our lives. It allows us to expand the compassion we may so freely extend to others to include ourselves. And the result is a joy and peace that the world cannot give! Joy and peace are surely the mark of aging well.

Our witness as we age

Perhaps the most profound preaching that elders are able to offer is their witness to this truth: our lives will always continue to have meaning. The longer we live, the more we are able to give witness to the power of God in our lives. Each of our lives has been an experience of God’s mercy; the longer we live, the more we can attest to that—both as recipients of God’s love and mercy and as conduits of love and mercy to others when we have allowed God to act through us.

How do we preach this good news? By being persons whose joy and gratitude point to the source of the gifts we have been given. Each time we do that, we become a light, filling the world with the light of

Aging into the Heart of Mercy, continued

Christ's presence by our own living of the gospel of mercy. In this way, we can emulate Dominic who is commemorated as *Lumen Ecclesiae*, "Light of the Church." And, as we age, let us be encouraged by remembering that some of the most powerful preaching that is done in each of our congregations is the witness of our elder members. Perhaps, like the wine in Cana, the best preaching is truly saved for last!

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Richard Woods, OP. *Mysticism and Prophecy: The Dominican Tradition*. Darton, Longman & Todd.

WEB RESOURCES

Dominican Life USA. News and articles about Dominican Life. <http://www.domlife.org/beingdominican/Spirituality/DominicanSpirituality.htm>

Dominican Spirituality (or The "Counter-Thread" in the Old Religious Story as The Golden Thread in the Dominican Family-Story). A classic reflection by Edward Schillebeeckx, OP. http://www.op.org/sites/www.op.org/files/public/documents/fichier/schillebeeckx_dominicanspirit.pdf



Sister Thoma Swanson, OP, has painted this contemporary representation of a traditional image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy, protecting the entire Dominican Family under her mantle. (An explanation of the figures may be found at: <http://www.dominicanstudies.org/library/dominic-finds-his-followers-under-mary%E2%80%99s-mantle-version-1.>)

From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

We join with Dominicans worldwide in celebrating the 800th anniversary year of their founding as the Order of Preachers. As our feature writer, Sr. Margaret Palliser, has so artfully pointed out, our world has been graced through the centuries with the lives of men and women who chose to follow St. Dominic's vision "of a community of itinerant preachers responding to new currents of thought in ever-new circumstances."



I was struck by the thought that we stand in this season of Advent by virtue of a similar dynamic; that of a courageous life choice influencing the world through time. At the Annunciation, Mary risked. Whether in the moment's breath or in measured consideration, at some point she proclaimed, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord!" Then she spent the rest of her life living into it.

Three times a day, if you're within earshot of a church, you'll hear disruptive grace. With each tolling of the Angelus bells, our safe, rational thought patterns are challenged. We're invited to remember the risk, courage, faith and fidelity that changed the course of time. Perhaps an Advent journey to St. Catherine's "cell of self-knowledge" is warranted. What choices await our "yes"?

From the Offices of NRRO

Brother Bob Metzger, SM, Associate Director for Planning and Education

Engaging Aging is scheduled to be sent out a few days after we finish the 28th year of the Retirement Fund for Religious collection. This collection remains successful due to the generosity of the donors and the dedicated work of the religious sisters, brothers and priests whom this collection assists. Please continue to remember these donors in your prayers at Christmas and throughout the year.



Calendar

January 4

- Direct Care Assistance applications mailed

February 16

- NRRO webinar, Topic TBD

March 13 - 16

- Tending the Vineyard workshop; Baltimore, MD

March 31

- Direct Care Assistance applications due

*Please join the staff
of the National Religious Retirement Office
as we give thanks this Christmas for the generosity
of our many friends and benefactors.
We pray that the birth of the Christ Child will bring peace
and joy to your life and to our world
throughout the coming year.*

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