

The Feast of Saint Dominic

Daily Reflection from the Bishop

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8 August 2020

*Stay Home. Stop the Spread. Save Lives.
If you have to go out, wear a mask.*

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As I said Mattins this morning with the propers for Saint Dominic, I spent some time in prayerful thanksgiving for all that I owe to Dominic and the friars who bear his name in our own day.

One of my longest-standing and closest friends (whom I have known since he was a baby-sitter of mine when I was 5 or 6 years old) is a Dominican, and at various times in my life I have found refuge under a Dominican roof. As a graduate student I often had to make trips to Rome to use the Vatican and other libraries, and a genial Irish Dominican there whom I had got to know always gave me a small room in the *convitto* of international students over which he presided with such grace and generosity. In my day the Prefect of the Vatican Library was a brilliant Dominican mediaevalist who had helped in the excavations beneath that remarkable church near the Coliseum, San Clemente, and he was so helpful to me in my research.

When my mother was dying in New York and I was the rector of a parish in Lancaster, I would have to take the train to Penn Station every Sunday evening, stay until Wednesday caring for her, and then return to Lancaster to care for the congregation. For the entire four agonizing months of those exhausting weekly journeys, I was welcomed at Saint Vincent's friary on the Upper East Side. They gave me a key, and each week there would be an envelope with a room number. They simply took me, and treated me as one of their own.

Then I had a mini-sabbatical in New Haven, and my old baby-sitter, at the time the prior of the Dominican priory there, gave me a splendid room in the house for most of the summer, where I was able both to work and to live in a community to help balance the isolation of reading and writing.

Now Kate and I are fast friends with the Dominicans here in Miami, many of whom teach at nearby Barry University, and who have welcomed us warmly to their priory.

These experiences do not include the various short stays at other Dominican houses over the years, and as I think about it, I have probably stayed with Dominicans more than with any other religious community. And always happily. It has been a long friendship with the *Domini canes*.

Then I remembered the Dominican theologians who have influenced me over the years. I had to read some Aquinas at seminary, and was fascinated by his method. Perhaps the most important thing that I have learnt over the years is Aquinas's emphasis that "God is not the answer; God is the question." And of course in Aquinas's work, a question does not in fact lead to an answer; it leads to a further question, and another question after that. And so on. Many know of the mystical theology of Catherine of Siena, a lay Dominican, and I have venerated her shrines in both Siena and Rome.

But I have spent more time with contemporary Dominicans. The patristic scholar Boniface Ramsey was once a Dominican, when he wrote the books that had the deepest impact on me. The great Yves Congar helped to shape the current theological world in which all mainstream Churches do their work today. No one can read for long without coming across books by Aidan Nichols, who seems to have written about almost everything.

Perhaps it is the late Herbert McCabe who has been the most interesting to me. It is astonishing to me that he died in 2001, for I still think of him as very much alive, as he was during the time I was a theological student. He was the long-standing editor of the fine journal, *New Blackfriars*, which I read whenever I can lay my hands on an issue, and his books are eminently readable. I wish that I had had such a lucid and engaging teacher of philosophical theology when I was in seminary.

Since his death his friend and executor, Brian Davies, has been publishing further books, and we have benefitted from this labour. One of McCabe's best books, *The New Creation*, about the sacramental life, first appeared in 1964, but was brought back to life in 2010 in a fresh edition. Here are some words from the Introduction that set the scene for the whole study:

We can no longer treat the sacraments...as "aids" to the spiritual life which the Church is fortunately able to dispense to her children; we must return to the classical tradition in which they are seen as our living contact with the humanity of Christ through which alone we share in divine life...

The sacramental reality is an object of faith, hidden from the unbeliever who sees merely the outward sign of it, but it is not the final object of faith. It is itself a symbol leading the believer on to a greater depth of mystery. Faith is a process of penetration into the divine life, it does not find rest in anything short of the Father. Through the sacramental life of the Church we reach to living union with the humanity of Christ but this of its nature carries us on to his divinity, and even the divinity of the Son is no terminus, for his whole being is to be in relation to the Father. Even when faith has matured by death and resurrection into the vision of God we shall not have reached something static, fixed, comprehensible; eternal life is an unceasing exploration into the abyss of the Godhead.

Saint Dominic left no real theological or spiritual writings – only three letters survive. But he left a remarkable heritage for our benefit in those who have chosen to follow his way and give themselves to theological exploration and careful and attentive preaching. It is a great deal for which to give thanks this morning.

Let us end with one of Aquinas's most beautiful hymns (in our Hymnal 329), which is at the heart of the celebration of the Maundy Thursday Liturgy, and which reflects what McCabe was also trying to say in his words about sacramentality:

*Now, my tongue, the mystery telling
of the glorious Body sing,
and the Blood, all price excelling,
which the Gentiles' Lord and King,
in a Virgin's womb once dwelling,*

shed for this world's ransoming.

*Given for us, and condescending
to be born for us below,
he, with us in converse blending
dwelt, the seed of truth to sow,
till he closed with wondrous ending
his most patient life of woe.*

*That last night, at supper lying,
'mid the Twelve, his chosen band,
Jesus, with the law complying,
keeps the feast its rites demand;
then, more precious food supplying,
gives himself with his own hand.*

*Word-made-flesh, the bread he taketh
by his word his Flesh to be,
wine his sacred Blood he maketh
though the senses fail to see:
faith alone, the true heart waketh,
to behold the mystery.*

There are several tunes for this hymn, but the most moving is *Pange lingua*. Here is a recording www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp5WDkFf260&t=29s

With love and prayers,

+ *Peter*