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“TAME THE DRAGON: DOMINICAN SISTERS PREACHING”

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Preaching as women Dominicans? The pulpit is not open for us, but talking about this issue includes much more than this! The contribution to the preaching mission of the Order by female Dominicans only becomes complete in light of the different challenges, approaches, and skills of Dominican Sisters worldwide.

It is a great joy, but also a challenge for me to stand here now with the task of telling something about the preaching of the Dominican sisters! Yesterday, we could listen to the profound reflections by the Master of the Order and discuss on it. What could I add to what he said?

But I *have* to add something. You expect this from me; otherwise you would not have invited me. And I also think that it is necessary. It has to do with the specific character of the Order of St. Dominic and its different branches. The main question is: in which sense do we, the apostolic sisters, share in the preaching charism of the Order. Do we?

One order and 100 faces

I do not have to tell you about the structure of the Dominican family! But unless—sometimes it seems to me that the knowledge about it is not too profound in the branches of the Order. This has a lot to do with us, the Dominican sisters.

The Order was founded by St. Dominic and acknowledged by the Church in 1216/17. The Order of Preachers—it is the charism of the Order to preach—this is the Charism given to it, and this is what the Church expects from Dominicans.

Already some years before, St. Dominic founded a women’s monastery in Prouille. And there have always been lay persons attracted by the Dominican way of life and preaching. If I can trust Wikipedia, Lay Dominicans, at the time named tertiaries, already existed as early as the 13th century, as well.

These three branches of the Order are clearly dedicated to the Charism of Preaching. They have a hierarchic structure with the Master of the Order at its head. The Order of the Friars—led by the Master of the Order and his council, divided into provinces with a similar structure. The Nuns, who acknowledge the Master of the Order as highest authority, make profession in his hands,



normally delegated to the promoter for the Nuns. The Laity have nowadays a rule acknowledged by the Order and a promoter in every province. They do profession as well in the hands of the Master, normally to his delegate.

What about the sisters? Talking about Dominican apostolic sisters, we talk about estimated 160 different congregations, the smallest counting two, the largest nearly three thousand sisters. In this, the Master of the Order is “*primus inter pares*” in the best sense of the Word: he has no formal authority for apostolic sisters. The General Chapters of the Order and the statements of the Master have no normative or legislative character, but an inspiring function. For the sisters it matters what the Order says. But it is no law to them.

Each female congregation has her own General prioress, proper constitutions, proper General Chapter, proper guidelines and mission statements—and their specific Charism, the proper gift to the Church.

And it is an error to see DSI as the “fourth branch” of the Order! DSI is a movement, not more, a voluntary union of sisters who are united in the same identity as members of the Dominican family. But they do not give up any autonomy. And each of them has a special vision on the proper charism, and of course a proper view on preaching as well!

Thus in fact, to talk about the female sisters preaching as Dominican sisters, you should have invited 160 sisters. Who am I to talk about this item?

Bethany and the Order of Preachers

Many sister congregations refer to St. Catherine. I would like to introduce another figure to clarify our identity as women preachers. So let me tell you the story of the family of Bethany and especially about St. Martha! Fr. Bruno yesterday mentioned several times St. Mary Magdalene as role model, sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to his words, such as St. Dominic sitting under the cross and meditating. When I talk now about St. Martha, I do not mean in first place the brave housemaid to whom Jesus said she had chosen the minor way!

According to the legend which dates at least in the 11th century, this “family of Bethany”, consisting of Lazarus, Mary Magdalene and Martha, together with their servants, had to flee in the first persecution of Christians in Palestine, to the South of France. Mary of Bethany was in these times considered to be identical with the sinner who anointed the feet of Jesus with nard and also with Mary Magdalene, the first testimony of the resurrection, “*Apostola Apostolorum*”. This legend is beautifully shown at the so named “*Tiefenbronner Magdalenenaltar*” by Lukas Moser.

The legend especially of Mary Magdalene, but also of the whole group of Bethany, is very strong in the Provence. Lazarus became bishop. I suppose that the city of St. Lazaire is called after him.

Mary was so full of desire to stay with the risen Lord that she went to the grotto of the Ste. Baume. From there, seven times a day she was brought by angels to the top of the Mount Pilon where she was allowed to see Jesus. Marcella and Sara are the servants to support this group of refugees. It is like a mirror of the Order: the priest who serves the people by celebrating the sacraments and preaching the gospel, the contemplative woman who lives in the loneliness of the grotto, contemplating and full of desire of the Lord, the laity who support them.

And it is Mary Magdalene who is the patron of the Order, as the first one to give through the testimony of the resurrection.

But what about Martha?

She also has a special role. According to the legend, she comes to the small city of Tarascon which is terrorized by a dragon. Martha finds a very feminine solution to this problem: in opposite



to St. George, she does not kill the beast, like St. George did, but—she succeeds in taming the dragon!

This is typical for Martha: already in the Bible, she is the active part of her family. And in Tarascon, she is shown as an independent woman who has the courage to try something very new and by this give hope to people who until then lived desperate and with fear. She brought the Gospel into action. This was *her* way, her very feminine way of preaching. I think, that she is the one who preferably should be the patron of the Dominican sisters!

Taming the dragon

Taming the dragon—for me this is the symbol of the life and charism of Dominican sisters.

I took some time to study different websites of Dominican sisters' congregations all over the World. You can imagine that it was not possible to study all of the 160 of them—and I was limited to the languages I speak. My focus was: what do the websites tell about the preaching mission of the specific congregation?

The study of the sites of different congregations, including my own, was a surprise. Very few, especially in the US, talk specifically about the Preaching Mission. Many websites do not even mention the word “preaching”!

Why are we Dominicans, if we do not even mention preaching as the essential of our Dominican life?

Because Dominican sisters are Dominicans by walking on the ways of St. Dominic. Many congregations talk about the four pillars of Dominican life. The contemplative dimension—*contemplarii et contemplata aliis tradere*—is vital. Community life plays an important role. Searching the truth, living truthfully according to the vows, especially the vow of poverty, close to the poor. And each congregation talks about “doing something”.

If we look into our specific histories, this result is not amazing. Most of the sisters' congregations were founded in the 19th century, some also in the 20th, especially in Africa and Asia. The foundations normally were answers to a specific need and a demand of the church, often represented by a Dominican friar.

In the times of the Industrial Revolution, you could grasp the challenges from the ground, and many women did so. They taught girls, took care of sick and old persons, and founded hospitals, nursing homes, orphanages, schools. None of these congregations was founded to preach in the specific way of this word. And of course, the idea of “preaching” in the sense of explaining the Gospel during Eucharist or in a church even did not come up. “Preaching” does not automatically belong to the specific charisma of Dominican sisters! The charism of the congregations has an own shape. Of course, preaching plays an important role in it, as “proclaiming the Gospel” should do for any Christian. But it is very often not part of the specific charism of Dominican sisters!

So do we not preach?

Of course we do. But we do it on our specific way. We “tame the dragon”. This is for me a wonderful term of describing how to deal with the problems of our World, in the times of our foundations as well as today. Sisters try to tame the dragons that disturb the lives of so many people.

The difference between taming and killing—taming the dragon has to do with taking over the power and the authority above what hinders human being and existence. It means an approach of catching confidence to overcome a destructive situation. Taming the dragon keeps respect towards the other, but showing the superiority of a different approach. It is based on relationship, for me one of the key items of evangelization. And this has the power to transform the use of skills



from a bad to a good one. Nothing is bad by origin, but many things, skills, means are used in a wrong or bad way. But if we tame them, we will change them into life giving things.

Sisters all over the World daily live the Gospel in action, each congregation in a specific way. This is their way of preaching. They find themselves in the words of St. Francis who said: “Preach the Gospel always, and when necessary, use words!”

If we, sisters, want to reach people, we have other places than the pulpit where we will find them, and where they are urgently waiting for us.

Our place is the place at the frontiers, like the General Chapter of Avila defined them. This has always been our place.

The frontier between life and death in struggling for health care, staying with the dying in the streets, giving a new chance for those who are left and abandoned, for those who do not find a sense in their life.

The frontier between human and inhuman by giving dignity to those who are rejected by the society, people in prison, at the margins of the cities, handicapped on body and soul, and often enough in the eyes of man simply ugly.

The frontiers of Christian experience, where there are no words to express anger, frustration, disappointment, and impotence, against personal and public catastrophes.

Frontiers of religious experience, in the difficult situations of Christian minority and persecution as well as in a society where people simply threw away everything they ever heard about God and faith, like in the Netherlands.

Frontiers of the Church, where people experience not to be seen because of being different in the broadest sense, where people, especially women, suffer from hierarchic structures and all kinds of discrimination and abuse of might.

For the Dominican sisters it would not have been necessary to define these places for preaching. For us, the definition of Avila was not new! We are—and have been for centuries—already there, at the frontiers.

If you call Justice and Peace “Gospel in Action”, do not forget that sisters already do and live this, always and all days. They bring into action what they understood from the Gospel and what they experienced in contemplation. Long before the Order defined Justice and Peace as a priority, many sisters in the World lived this already.

The challenges for the sisters

Dominican sisters preach, day after day, at the places where they are. They proclaim the Gospel of Mercy, and they use their means as women to reach people which men could not reach easily. They are Dominicans by choice and by their way of life, but not by preaching charism. The sisters are in first place preaching teachers, preaching nurses, preaching experts in physics, law, business affairs. A Friar has to become a preacher to be a Dominican, a Dominican sister lives in the footprints of St. Dominic as a preaching.

The preaching mission of the sisters knows some specific challenges which I want to talk about now.

The challenge of income

The sisters of the congregation of St. Catherine, motherhouse in Italy, have sisters in Nigeria. They will start with a bakery at the place where they live—not as an apostolic ministry, but just to earn money. Sr. Elvira, the General Prioress, said that they always try to enable the sisters to take care of their daily life, also economically. So the bakery has really nothing to do with preaching, even if the sisters will sell their bread in habit and be friendly to everyone they meet.



Two years ago, three sisters of the Nashville Dominicans came to the Netherlands and live now in a small village among the people. They give catechesis, have faith groups, work with young people, many of them not baptized, and already play an important role in the diocese. But—they hope that they will be acknowledged as teachers for high school, so that they will have a structural income and can support themselves. A sister asked: Did they come to teach our Dutch children English? Or did they come to proclaim the Gospel? A just question, but the sisters cannot live on air alone.

I tell these examples to point out a fact that is more virulent for the Sisters as for the Friars. For us, a Mass stipend or a job as parish priest with a structural income—thus a paid job as preacher—in most of the cases is very difficult to get. There are some sisters working in parishes, but this is not the normal reality of the life of the sisters. Many congregations worldwide run schools. But sisters working there, teaching mathematics or housekeeping or sewing or whatever, are teachers who are paid for their teaching.

This means that preaching for many sisters is a question of attitude and not principally a question of task or job. We have to develop a way of working that makes visible what we want to proclaim, even if it is not directly connected to preaching or far away from topics of the Gospel! We have to develop the attitude of a preacher in the garden and in the kitchen, at the nursery and at school, at university and in a retreat house. The example of St. Dominic: he talked with God or about God.

Here, the community dimension of our life also becomes very important. The sisters' way of preaching as a community also includes the possibility that one or two are made free from the pressure of gaining money, for the sake of preaching, while the others do other things like housekeeping or earning money. Then, the sisters who are made free have a special mission from their congregation. This is always a challenge, we have to be alert for jealousy, and see preaching really as a common assignment.

The challenge of study

“Study” is one of the pillars of Dominican life. Once, a young sister said: Our preaching should be intelligent and intelligible. This of course is also true for the sisters in general. Thus, there is the need of a good basic formation. Normally, we get this formation during our novitiate. In most of the congregations, this will take two years.

And then?

For the Friars, it is normal to go on with academic studies. For the sisters, it depends on the charism and mission of the proper congregation. But for the majority, after novitiate, it will not be an academic theological study but any kind of preparation for the future work. Those who already have a profession or a special formation will start working at once. And most of the sisters will find this very normal.

The challenge is not to neglect study, including theological deepening. The reality of most of the sisters is often different. A full job in Germany includes 39 hours per week. Besides this, there is community and prayer life and the necessity of staying up to date in professional items of the proper job. To organize in such a strong schedule times for theological studies, is very hard. Especially for those who are not highly educated and not used to read a lot.

Nevertheless, there is no dispensation of study. If we want to be Dominicans, we have to find ways to enable our sisters to do so. Those who are here as sisters, are not the representative average of Dominican sisters, we may not forget this! There are no numbers on it, but I estimate that from the about 24.000 sisters of DSI maybe less than 10 percent have a theological degree.



But studying is not only having a theological degree! It is a way of being able to speak about our faith in a reasonable way. And this is enough.

Sometimes I hear among the sisters that we should let our young sisters go to the university for theological studies. If there are those who are skilled for this, it is fine. And it is also necessary for a congregation to be able to good theological reflection. But this is not part of our identity as Dominican sisters!

The challenge of self-confidence as Dominicans

This leads me to the last challenge I want to point out: the challenge of self-confidence as Dominican sisters in the Dominican family.

Sometimes it seems to me that we have a great lack on this. We feel as inferior Dominicans, because we are not theologians, because we did and do not study enough, because we feel intellectually inferior to the friars, because the friars do such wonderful things. I must say, that sometimes the friars support us in our inferior behavior. The collaboration of friars and sisters does not work well at places where the “unity in diversity” is seen as a lack and not as a chance.

This leads to dangerous misinterpretations. We are not the friars, and we should not want to be. We are Dominican sisters. We have our specific charisms, our proper missions, our proper possibilities of preaching and proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God. It would lead to a certain impoverishment of the Order if we would give this up. It is like the image of the face of Christ which I showed you at the beginning. Together, we form the image of Christ. But we do this in diversity, because this diversity is richness, a gift to the Order and to the Church.

Conclusion

We have to give so much to each other, for the sake of the people! We are united in following the way of St. Dominic, with our specific charisms. What if we could learn better to accept each other as different pieces of one reality, the face of Christ? We could do a lot together, if we could learn to live and work as equals. Which would mean a change of mind, especially but not only for the brothers, and learn that collaboration does not mean that the friars do things and invite the sisters and the lay to participate, while they guide us through the project.

Do we really realize how powerful we could be together? When I was on the DSI council, it made me proud and even happy when I realized that in at most three days we—the Dominican family with all its branches—would be able to reach nearly every part of the world.

Still the reality is not as such. But we can change it, and it would be worthwhile to do so. Respecting the differences in our charisms will be an important step. And let us then be together followers of St. Dominic!

Yes, we, Dominican Sisters all over the world, are female proclaimers of a future which already has begun. We live with the people and for the people. We preach through our being and our work, we share the lives and the sorrows of the people around us. We build up networks and relationship. We are part of the large and beautiful Dominican Family to whom we want to belong and which hopefully is proud of her sisters and their life preaching.