

St Dominic

It might seem that I began these brief autobiographical essays the wrong way round, beginning with how Dominic was remembered, rather than what he did. However, the man's character is crucial to understanding his mission, which, to our eyes, and in our multi-cultural setting, can seem dogmatic, exclusionary, and intolerant. Dominic's life work was the conversion of the Cathars of southern France; a semi-Christian sect who combined Christian ideas



with forms of neo-platonic Gnosticism. Because Neo-Platonists taught that the body was the prison of the soul, and that only the soul could dwell in eternity, the Cathars practiced extreme forms of ascetic self-denial. Cathars applied this dualism to the Christian idea of a creator God, and concluded that there must be a true God who was good and created the immaterial soul, and an evil God who created the physical world in which the soul was trapped. 'Perfect' practitioners of the religion were expected to eschew almost all bodily needs; barely eating and renouncing physical intimacy. At a time when most people were profoundly and permanently poor, this embrace of poverty as a religious ideal was hugely powerful and won many converts. By contrast, Catholic prelates- Bishops, Abbots, and Priors- often comported themselves in the style of the nobility from which they were typically descended. Predictably, the Benedictine Abbots sent initially to reconvert the Cathars failed.

Dominic realised that only by living in and preaching from a position of evangelical poverty, poverty in imitation of Christ and the apostles, could Catholics offer an effective counter-example to the Cathars. He also realised that, theologically, his followers would have to be highly educated and able to defend the Catholic faith from very able detractors. It was to this end that he formed the Ordo Praedicatorum- the Order of Preachers or Dominicans as they became known. He spent his life trying to reconvert the Cathars from what he saw as an extremely dangerous heresy; not only because of its theological errors, but because of its hatred of the body. While Dominic himself lived an ascetic life, he did so out of charity – in order to share with others and control the temptations, rather than because he thought the body was evil. Indeed, he famously encouraged, at times of celebration, what would be considered very lax and indulgent behaviour and feasting amongst the nuns of the convents he founded, precisely because he believed that discipline must be tempered with enjoyment.

It is important to stress Dominic's gentleness and sympathy with ordinary people, not only because of the pluralist sensibilities of our times, but also because, after Dominic's death, not only was the order he founded (as well as the Franciscan order) instrumental in the inquisition, quite against the spirit of both respective founders, but the Catholic church also launched a rather bloody crusade against the Cathars. It is important to understand that Dominic's life work was peaceful conversion by persuasion and example, and later practice departed significantly from his spirit. He himself was not involved with either the inquisition or the crusade, nor were the senior founding members of the Dominican Order.

I once asked Rowan Williams what he thought of St Dominic, and he replied that his abiding impression was of someone who was happy to embrace a simple calling and work tirelessly towards one end, but without having to take centre stage in achieving it. Dominic was content to enable others dedicated to the same goal as himself. Dominic refused a bishopric on three occasions. When he was occasionally credited with miracles, he apparently convinced others, including the Pope, not to publicise what had happened. He constantly insisted on humility; refusing the employment of architectural grandeur for the Dominican churches that began to be built during his lifetime. When he assembled new groups of brethren, after a short time he would send them off on missions, confident in their abilities and trusting in God's holy spirit to guide them. He insisted on discipline and humility, but he was not a micro-manager, nor was he concerned with receiving credit for his achievements.

Both Dominic and Francis, in setting up their respective orders, were serving the church. But they were both at the same time, implicitly or explicitly, critiquing existing church practice. The poverty and simplicity of both orders was a rebuke to the often princely state that leading monastics lived and travelled. The insistence on preaching and persuasion was an implicit criticism of the military Crusade launched against the Cathars. Occasionally, Dominic would voice this criticism. Encountering the Bishop of Toulouse travelling with an armed escort, he rebuked the Bishop, and told him in no uncertain terms that this was not the way to win converts. Dominic believed firmly that preaching was successful if it managed to provoke in those who listened the love of God and their fellow man. Both Dominic and Francis, then, in leading movements of renewal, were serving the church precisely by disagreeing with it; by critiquing existing practices, assumptions, and compromises with something higher in view.

Dominic also believed that preachers must be able to clearly explain the doctrine of the church and the content of scripture, and do justice to its profundity and complexity. In view of this he insisted that many of the brethren attend the great universities of the day and master the theology of the time. In time the Dominican order produced many of the great masters of medieval theology and mysticism: Albert the Great, St Thomas Aquinas, and Meister Eckhardt amongst them. In emphasising educated preaching, Dominic implicitly rebuked the secular clergy, who often had no such learning and rarely if ever preached—perhaps only a few times a year. Even when they did so, they tended to simply read out passages from collections of sermons. Dominic's genius was, throughout his life, to see where existing practice simply wouldn't do, and go about changing it.

Unlike Francis, Dominic left behind few if any authenticated written works. Works of his were known in his lifetime but have subsequently been lost. Thus, unlike Francis, Dominic the man seems to fade from view somewhat; we only encounter him in the memories of those who knew him and in the features of his order; he rarely if ever comes to us in his own words. Dominic the man simply disappears from history; he doesn't hang around to offer his own account or represent himself, and perhaps, given Rowan Williams' assessment of him, that's what he would have wanted.



Given these examples, we can summarise Dominic's approach and character as follows. Dominic was humble enough to accept that the Church often got things wrong, honest enough to point that out, consistent enough to change the way he and others lived in response to the claim of the Gospel, and brave enough to oppose, criticise, and rebuke those who he felt were letting the Gospel down, while also being gentle enough that he was understood to be doing so in a spirit of charity. Jordan of Saxony, Dominic's successor as master-general of the order, wrote of him: "Nothing disturbed the even temper of his soul except his quick sympathy with every sort of suffering. And as a man's face shows whether he is happy or not, it was easy to see from his friendly and joyous countenance that he was at peace inwardly." When in 1234 Pope Gregory IX signed the decree of canonization, he remarked that he no more doubted the sanctity of Dominic than he doubted that of St. Peter or St. Paul.

The Dominican Cross, representing the juxtaposition of truth and error, life and death.

Find your favourite space for this time of prayerful reflection

light a candle and try to set aside words and images.

**Slow down, breathe calmly, be comfortable
and relax.**

Set aside 10 minutes or more

Sense the presence of God in this stillness.

**Prayer does not always require words- in fact, letting go of words can allow
better words space to be spoken.**

'And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.' (Matt.6:7)

Our opening prayer

O God of the prophets, you opened the eyes of your servant Dominic to perceive a famine of the hearing of the word of the Lord and to satisfy that hunger with sound preaching. Make us attentive to the hungers of the world, and quick to respond in love to those who are perishing. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

(The Anglican Order of Preachers)

Verses from St Matthew's Gospel

**19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the
name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit 20 and teaching**

them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Let's spend time and look at ourselves.

Do we live in emulation of the Saints?

Are there examples of faith that we can follow?

How do habits and temptations lead us astray?

We listen to 'Veni, Veni, Emmanuel' (O Come, O Come Emmanuel) sung by the King's Singers a song which, while later than Dominic, perhaps expresses his dearest hope.



Let us pray in confidence using the words our Saviour gave us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil. Amen

The closing prayer of the Anglican Dominican Rosary

Lord Jesus Christ, having prayerfully contemplated the mysteries of your Father's will, so may we be sent in the power of your Holy Spirit to those who have not heard and to those who have not believed, that through us your kingdom might come. Amen

Br Samuel Eccleston AOP (Anglican Order of Preachers)

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Parish of Kirklees Valley, Bury, (All Saints, Elton & St James, Woolfold) - In the Diocese of Manchester

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