

Novitiate Module

Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic

Province of St. Joseph

APOSTOLATE

Duc in Altum!

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At Pope Benedict XVI's papal inauguration, he was given a pallium, a white cloth woven of pure lamb's wool to represent the yoke of the Lamb of God. This liturgical symbol shows humanity that in governing the Roman Catholic Church, the Holy Father's first act is to put on the Lamb's yoke, put on God's Will.

God's Will is also "put on" through His Church and through the apostolates of lay members of the Dominican fraternities. Through His Church, Christ carries all of us until the end of time, but he also asks us, like the Pope, to put on God's yoke and carry one another to Him. Responding to this request marks and underpins all Dominican apostolates, which are at their core, the Order's worldwide effort to implement God's will for humanity.

One of Four Pillars

A novice's search for an appropriate apostolate should begin with an understanding of why the fraternities of St. Dominic are structured around four pillars: prayer, study, apostolate, and community. These four activities all work in concert to advance a novice's growth in holiness and in a Dominican's ability to serve Holy Mother Church. Sharing Christ and His Word with other souls requires the right spiritual disposition, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, so prayer is an essential prerequisite. Teaching about Christ requires study because one must know the person of Christ in order to bring Him to others. That is why St. Dominic encouraged his followers to become experts in the Word of God, to ponder it, penetrate it, and then preach it. And Dominican community is important because a "community of purpose" can often undertake a formidable apostolate and pool the talent of many to serve Christ.

Dominican apostolates are activities that proceed naturally from the other pillars of prayer, study, and community. These activities are carried out to serve Christ and His Church by "preaching" from our lay state in life, that is, by manifesting our faith in, and love of, Christ right smack in the middle of a secular world. We manifest our love by finding ways to bring Christ to souls and souls to Christ.

A novice is made aware of the Dominican call to an apostolate at the reception ceremony, when he or she is told:

“Act in such a manner ... for the good of the Church and humankind, to clothe Yourself in Christ and to manifest Him living in you.”¹

Examples

For a novice to discern an apostolate, it helps to consider some examples.

Some of the spiritual works of mercy are obvious choices. These practices of Catholic charity toward one’s neighbor’s soul are based on the teaching of Christ and have been part of Church practices since apostolic times: 1) convert the sinner; 2) instruct the ignorant; 3) counsel the doubtful; 4) comfort the sorrowful; and 5) pray for the living and the dead.²

Other apostolates may include web-based blogging to provide instruction in the faith or defense of the faith; prison ministry that involves leading Scripture study, teaching the Catholic faith, or preparing inmates for the sacraments; visiting the sick and bringing them both comfort and Holy Communion; translating spiritual treasures from English to other languages and making the translations available to immigrant souls; visiting hospitals to provide patients with consolation and spiritual solidarity; providing religious instruction to children in parish religious education programs; providing leadership, support, and teaching for inquiry classes about the Catholic faith.

While these examples represent only a few of the Dominican apostolates under way, all share one common goal: going out two by two (where possible) to bring other souls to Christ. Apostolates involve continuously studying to know God better, and then sharing one’s insights with others. There is no room in a Dominican heart to hoard God; there is instead, a constant reaching out to contemplate and share the fruits of contemplation. By their study, Dominicans bring God into their mind and heart, and by their apostolates, they associate themselves with Christ’s work of redemption.

Not Apostolates

It is important for novices also to recognize what may not constitute an apostolate. Serving on parish councils or as an usher or lector, joining parish fellowship organizations, being a member of a sodality or other parish-based organizations, while commendable and encouraged activities, may not constitute apostolates because their activities do not focus directly upon serving the souls of one’s neighbor.

Mandate for Apostolic Action

The apostolate is a pillar of Dominican spirituality because Christ says it is important. He tells us we are to imitate Him by reaching out to others:

“By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”³

“Feed my sheep,”⁴ Christ tells Peter and us as well. “Feeding” means loving and being ready to suffer, to fast, and to pray for all souls. It means transforming the face of the earth. However, for Lay Dominicans to transform the world to Christ’s way, they must first know Christ. They must take seriously Saint Paul’s exhortation to have “the mind of Christ.”⁵ This Pauline vision of the Church is also the Dominican’s vision, so the pillars of prayer and study are forever linking to apostolic work.

Pope Benedict XVI has emphasized the critical need for all lay Catholics to encounter Jesus on a personal level, because He knows that this communication with the Incarnate Son of God is necessary to bring the grace to put our faith into action. Our perseverance in apostolates will eventually become attenuated and deprived of their deeper meaning if they are not rooted in faith, hope, and prayer – faith understood as the indwelling of Holy Trinity in our hearts through divine grace and prayer that perpetually celebrates our unity with the person of Jesus Christ.⁶

St. Thomas Aquinas explains that while prayer and contemplation of God is better than apostolic work, the best approach for Dominican spiritual growth is linking the two activities to one another. He writes:

“... The work of the active life is twofold; one proceeding from the fullness of contemplation, such as teaching and preaching ... and this work is more excellent than simple contemplation for it is better to enlighten than merely to shine, **so it is better to give to others the fruits of one’s contemplation than merely to contemplate.** The second work of the active life consists completely in outward occupation, such as almsgiving, receiving guests, and the like, which are less excellent than the works of contemplation, except in cases of necessity. Therefore, they hold the highest place in religious Orders who are committed to teaching and preaching, who moreover are nearest to Episcopal perfection. Orders directed to contemplation hold second place; those occupied with external things hold the third.”⁷

The Second Vatican Council exhorts the laity to apostolic action. The Council fathers teach us:

“It is quite clear that all Christians in whatever state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity ...^{8a} Insofar as we are all called to holiness, the call to the lay state is no less a ‘vocation’ than that of the priesthood or religious life. It has its own distinctive nature, which is absolutely essential to the healthy, overall functioning of the Body of Christ, the Church.”^{8b}

The encyclical *Lumen Gentium* explains further: “It is the special vocation of the laity to seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God ... The faithful must assist each other to live holier lives even in their daily occupations. In this way the world may be permeated by the spirit of Christ and it may more effectively fulfill its purpose in justice, charity, and peace. The laity have the principal role in the overall fulfillment of this duty. Therefore, by their competence in secular training and by their activity, elevated from within by the grace of Christ, let them vigorously contribute their effort, so that

created goods may be perfected by human labor, technical skill and civic culture for the benefit of all men according to the design of the Creator and the light of His Word. May the goods of this world be more equitably distributed among all men, and may they in their own way be conducive to universal progress in human and Christian freedom. In this manner, through the members of the Church, will Christ progressively illumine the whole of human society with His saving light.”⁹

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* adds its voice and reiterates the importance of apostolic action by the laity:

“By reason of their special vocation, it belongs to the laity ... to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are closely associated that these may always be effected and grow according to Christ ...”¹⁰

The Catechism goes on to stress that lay action is “necessary especially when the matter involved discovering or inventing the means for permeating social, political, and economic realities with the demands of Christian doctrine and life. Lay believers are in the front line of Church life; for them the Church is the animating principle of human society. Therefore, they in particular, out to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church ...”¹¹ The laity ... have the right and duty to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all men throughout the earth. ... the apostolate of the pastors cannot be fully effective without it.¹²

Similarly, in his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Pope John Paul II explained that for our Christian witness to be effective, especially in controversial areas, it is important to explain properly the reasons for the Church’s position, stressing that it is not a case of imposing on non-believers a vision based on faith, but of interpreting and defending the values rooted in the very nature of the human person.¹³ And Vatican II, in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, instructs the laity that the Christian message does not inhibit men and women from building up the world, or make them disinterested in the welfare of their fellow human beings. On the contrary, it obliges them more fully to do these very things.¹⁴

Dominican Disposition Concerning an Apostolate

Through Christ’s passion, death, resurrection, and ascension, he has renewed the face of the earth; but – as is evident in the words he speaks in the Gospel of Saint John – the “world” still “does not know” Christ, and in fact, often “hates” Christ.¹⁵ It should come as no surprise, then, to Dominican novices that they may encounter resistance or even opposition in the world as they carry out their apostolates. Pope Benedict reminds us that the only possible response for a Christian in the face of such rejection is love – a response possible for us to make only through the grace of Christ. The novice must understand that the universal call to holiness and apostolic action prompts Lay Dominicans to patiently, deliberately, and strategically share Christ’s love with the world independent of the world’s response.

With grounding in prayer and study, Dominican novices approach their apostolates with unmitigated trust in God’s providence and in His ability to bring grace into chaos. They are ever mindful that God works through them during apostolates in ways that we may not even understand, so it is critical not to let one’s hubris impede His plans. Lay members often must

begin an apostolate before they feel fully prepared. The Dominican preaching charism historically has not included the luxury of interminable prayer and study before starting a job for Holy Mother Church. Like Bishop Diego and St. Dominic in the 13th century, Lay Dominicans, ready or not, are called through their apostolates to respond to the needs of their times. Undaunted, a Dominican will get started on an apostolate, knowing that continuous prayer and study along the way will bolster one's ability to serve God well.

A novice may find it helpful to begin one's apostolate with the *Actiones Nostras*, an ancient and venerable prayer from the Roman Missal that reminds one of the proper mindset for service:

Actiones nostras quaesumus, Domine,
aspirando praeveni et adjuvando prosequere:
ut cuncta nostra oratio et operatio a te semper incipiat
et per te coepta finiatur per Christum Dominum nostrum. Amen.

Direct, we beg thee, O Lord, our prayers and our actions by
Thy holy inspirations and carry them on by Thy gracious assistance,
so that every work of ours may always be with Thee, and through
Thee come to completion. Amen.¹⁶

His Holiness Benedict XVI never tires of reminding us that as we carry out our apostolates, God is near, that He is our friend, and that He is constantly speaking to us about the most essential things in life. He accompanies us on our journey and – as a Good Shepherd who cares deeply for his flock – he never abandons us.⁶

The metaphor of the Catholic laity as “leaven” – used by Our Lord and adopted by both the Second Vatican Council⁸ and the Catechism of the Catholic Church – most aptly describes the effects of our Dominican apostolates: our work may appear hidden, but if it is steady and consistent, if a novice gives the work his or her best effort, it may well cause the entire dough to rise. Whether success is seen or not, though, the Dominican keeps on “preaching”.

Conclusion

Dominican novices should undertake their apostolates by following the same agenda Pope Benedict XVI set for himself at the beginning of his pontificate:

“My true program for governing the Church is not to carry out my own will or pursue my own ideas, but to place myself together with the entire Church in listening to the Word of the Lord, discerning his will, and allowing myself to be led by him, because he alone will guide the Church through this phase of history.”¹⁷

Times and places unceasingly appeal to Dominicans to open their souls to the living God, whether this be in prayer or study in preparation for the apostolate. One and all work as a single Dominican mystical body moving with one mind and heart toward God.¹⁸ With the Pope, through our Dominican apostolates, we put on the pallium of service and allow Christ to work through us to transform the face of the earth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What needs of the Church do you observe in our times?
2. What skills do you have that could be used to build up the Mystical Body of Christ?
What skills can you acquire to do the same?
3. How do you plan to discern your apostolate?
4. How will you use the pillars of Dominican spirituality to bolster you in your apostolate?

ADDITIONAL READING

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