

Topic 11: Dominicans: The Order of Preachers, Part 1

Overview: St. Dominic was a contemporary of St. Francis. Legend has it that they met at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. These two figures were different in personality and temperament but similar in their impulse to bring the desert and monastery into the world and to live poorly and simply. Franciscans and Dominicans are considered mendicants, begging orders that depend on the goodness of God and the generosity of others for their daily sustenance. The heretical movements in the thirteenth century were critical of the wealth and opulence that they saw in some clerics. They called for reform of the church and the clergy. It was the decadence of the thirteenth century Church that led them to leave the Church. His way of preaching was didactic, emphasizing the centrality of truth.

St. Dominic Guzman (1170–1221): In his Divine Comedy, Dante aimed to criticize the corruption of the Church. Interestingly, Dante praised St. Dominic for his poverty and desire to spread the gospel through preaching.

1) Dante included a piece about St. Dominic in the Divine Comedy. In this passage, Dante captured the spirit and influence of Dominic.

2) Dominic had a passion for preaching the Word of God.

- St. Dominic started out as a canon. Even as a canon, Dominic's interest lay in preaching and the care of souls.
- Early in 1206, while travelling with his bishop, Dominic encountered a heretical group called the Albigensians. Dominic and his bishop hoped to convince the Albigensians of their heresy by presenting the truth in the example of their lives.

1) Pope Innocent III granted Dominic permission to preach.

- The originality of Dominic's vision is documented in the primitive constitutions framed under his leadership between 1216 and 1220 and revised after his death by the general chapter of 1228.
- Dominic prioritized preaching.

1) Dominic hoped to combat heretical ways of thinking and the distortion of the gospel. The Albigensian heresy developed in part as a reaction to the opulence and corruption of the Church. One of the reasons that he founded the Order of Preachers was to combat this heresy. His way of preaching was didactic, emphasizing the centrality of truth.

2) Dominic remained loyal to the Church but lived a life of poverty.

Elements of St. Dominic's Spirituality

- His vision was that the common life, liturgy, contemplation, and study were to be blended into a whole that would serve rather than hinder preaching. St. Dominic and his followers adopted the Rule of St. Augustine.
- Liturgical celebration was considered to be very important. He brought the praying of the Divine Office into the life of the friars.
- Contemplation was a point of emphasis. St. Dominic engaged in private prayer. Although Dominic never authored a treatise on prayer, a commentary called "The Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic" was published one hundred years after his death.

1) Bowing before the altar as if Christ were really present

2) Preaching God's mercy while lying prostrate

3) Performing acts of penance

4) Genuflecting frequently before a crucifix

5) Accompanying one's prayer with hand gestures and bodily movement

6) Posturing oneself in the form of the Cross

7) Arching the entire body heavenward

8) Studying divine truth

9) Praising God while traveling

- The Lectio Divina is brought into Dominican spirituality in a new way. Reflecting on the word of God is a form of contemplation.
- Nourished by prayer and the study of the Gospels, Dominic's preaching caught fire. The Order's motto became: "To praise, to bless, to preach."
- There was a place for study in his spirituality. This reflects a departure from St. Francis's preaching. St. Dominic had an agenda of combatting the heresies of his day.

1) Dominican spirituality involves a communal and personal engagement with the Word.

2) Dominic's vision made study a religious exercise.

3) The inadequate training of preachers proved to be a primary source of the faith crisis within the Church at the time.

- In his form of government, St. Dominic emphasized a democratic way of life. Friars were to work all things out together. Dominic himself was obedient to the will of the community and allowed various currents to flow from his original impulse.
- “Cry the gospel with your life.”

Review Questions

1. St. Dominic was called to combat the heresies of his day, especially the Albigensians. What are some of the heresies of today? How do we preach truth with love and compassion?

2. Legend has it that the Blessed Mother gave the fifteen decades of the rosary to St. Dominic. This is meant to be a contemplative form of prayer, repeating a mantra and being aware of God’s presence. Try praying the rosary in this way.

3. St. Dominic and the Dominican School emphasize truth. How was the truth of the faith handed down to you and how to you now hand it down to others?