

Topic 12: The Dominicans: The Order of Preachers, Part 2

Overview: The Dominican movement in Christian spirituality was a source of renewal not only in the thirteenth century but also in subsequent centuries, up to and including the present time. Just as St. Bonaventure was the intellectual genius of the early Franciscan movement, so too was St. Thomas Aquinas for the Dominicans. *His Summa Theologiae* was his masterpiece that continues to influence theological minds. In addition, his great school of spirituality had many mystics and saints throughout the centuries, among them John Tauler, Henry Suso, Meister Eckhart and St. Catherine of Siena.

St Thomas Aquinas

- Aquinas gave St. Dominic's vision a systematic theological expression in his extensive writings.
- Aquinas held a chair at the University of Paris but spent most of his life as a lecturer in Dominican houses.
- The *Summa Theologiae* is his masterpiece.
- His conviction that the intellect is primary and that love flows from knowledge is central to his theology. He affirms the incomprehensibility of God while holding that, through revelation, God has expressed the will to lead humankind to fulfillment.

1) All being is good. Humans are made in God's image.

2) His theology is not static. He recognizes that universal principles cannot be applied to individual circumstances without discernment.

- Teaching was Aquinas's form of preaching in the Dominican Order. He was faithful to Dominic's emphasis on study.
- Aquinas employed Aristotelian philosophy to develop his theology.
- St. Dominic's emphasis on prayer comes through in Thomas Aquinas.
- Aquinas' theology continues to influence the Church today.
- While praying before a crucifix, Aquinas had a vision of the crucified Christ. After this experience, Aquinas said "take all that I wrote and burn it." At the end of his life, he integrated the head and the heart.

St. Catherine of Siena

- St. Catherine of Siena brought a feminine dimension to Dominican spirituality.

- She was born in 1347. She took the Dominican habit when she was 18. Catherine belonged to the Mantellate, a group of women associated with the Dominican Order. For several years, she lived as a recluse in her parents' home, going out only for Mass.
- In 1368, she sensed the call to go out and work among her sisters. Her activity amongst the sick and destitute brought her notoriety.
- She became a spiritual mother. Others recognized her wisdom and spirituality.
- She was called upon to be a mediator of the intense politics of 14th-century Italy.
- Catherine, perhaps more than any other Dominican except Dominic, exemplifies the dynamic of contemplation and action. Her prayer and contemplation ultimately led her out into the world.
- She was a powerful influence in the Church and society in her day.
- From one of her letters: "Dearest Father, I beg you to fulfill my longing to see you united with and transformed in God. But this is impossible unless we are one with His Will. Oh sweetest eternal Will, to have taught us how to discover your holy Will! If we were to ask that gentlest most loving young man and most merciful father, this is how he would answer us: 'Dearest children, if you wish to discover and experience the effects of My will, dwell within the cell of your soul'. This cell is a well in which there is earth as well as water. In the earth we can recognize our own poverty: we see that we are not - for we are not. We see that our being is from God. Oh ineffable blazing charity! I see next that as we discover the earth we get to the living water, the very core of the knowledge of God's true and gentle will which desires nothing else but that we be made holy. So let us enter into the depths of that well - for if we dwell there, we will necessarily come to know both God's goodness and ourselves. In recognizing that we are nothing we humble ourselves. And in humbling ourselves we enter that flaming, consumed heart, opened up like a window without shutters, never to be closed. As we focus there the eye of the free will God has given us, we see and know that His Will has become nothing other than our sanctification.'" The Rhineland Mystics (14th Century)

Three figures epitomize Dominican spirituality in unique ways.

- 1) John Tauler
- 2) Henry Suso
- 3) Meister Eckhart

(a) Eckhart has become an important figure in contemporary theology, especially in creation-centered spiritualities. Mendicant spirituality is an affirmation of the goodness of the human person and the beauty of God's creation.

(b) Eckhart was born in Germany in 1260 and died in 1329, shortly after a papal trial. Scholars today agree that he was unjustly condemned.

(c) Eckhart's spirituality is politically conscious, culminating in social justice. He rejected NeoPlatonism's threefold path of piety and expressed the journey towards union with God in a different way.

(i) Via positiva: Eckhart emphasized the goodness of creation. It was a theology of gratitude and praise. Jesus came to remind us that we were created in the image of God.

(ii) Via negativa: we experience God by letting go. Eckhart invites us to befriend the darkness and the nothingness.

(iii) Via creativa: "Our union with God is a fruitful union." Eckhart takes the notion of contemplation and brings it to a new place. We center by way of giving birth.

(iv) Via transformativa: he suggests building a new creation by way of compassion and social justice.

Review Questions

1. Study was important in the formation of preachers and teachers in the Dominican tradition. Reflect on the amount of time you give to study and reading. How might you go deeper into study in your life?
2. St. Catherine of Siena was a powerful woman who was not afraid to confront the pope. Reflect on the role of women in the Church and how they might play a more important role, as did Catherine.
3. St. Thomas Aquinas is the Church's great theologian. He models for us that it is important for spirituality and Christian living to be rooted in good theology. Read a contemporary theologian (preferably a book, but an article would be good as well).