

The scent of flowers, mysteries revealed, invitations of the Spirit. An approach to the life of study in the Dominican charism

This article presents research and reflection on study as a characteristic of the Dominican charism and an act of hope. Research carried out among the Dominican sisters of Latin America and the Caribbean. The questionnaires returned by ten sisters. Theology and the mystery of God, who gives himself to us by grace. Having a heart open and receptive to dialogue with contemporary thought.

I. Introduction

We are convinced that death is not the last word; we believe that Life has the power to climb over all walls...

In Latin America and the Caribbean the certainty is growing that, although life is threatened on every side, through our

theological reflection in the struggle for Justice and Peace we are finding ways of opening up "spaces for life".

Study, through the charism which inspired Dominic Guzman, opens up our horizons and challenges us to look around for alternative ways to dialogue with the different cultures we

find on our continent. This is why we can state, *Like St Dominic, who wanted everyone to have personal contact with Jesus, we feel that we are being sent out to all men and women, all groups, all peoples, to believers and unbelievers, and above all to the poor, to discover, with and through them, the*

Meeting of CODALC-CIDALC, 10 February 2010 at St. Paul of Brasil: an important occasion for the sisters who had taken part in that Assembly





Election of the CODALC co-ordinating team for the period 2010- 2013

Kingdom present in our history. We take on this call to mission through a continuous process of education, which accompanies growth of individuals and of groups through essential interdisciplinary paths. Moreover, we are convinced that our preaching, which seeks to speak words of peace on many frontiers, finds that these frontiers are the priority places for theological reflection and educational concerns¹. The spiritual testament left to us by Dominic invites us to study as a way of understanding what we believe, and to accept the challenges arising from cultural growth. The need to study becomes an essential part of our faithfulness.

Bearing in mind several characteristics of Dominican study – that it allows us to be sent to different frontiers, that it is a community activity, that it makes us aware of interdisciplinary connections, that it fosters dialogue, that it stirs us to compas-

sion and that it sends us in search of truth – I would like to make some observations on our present situation.

The place of systematic study for women; although study is a spiritual exercise, it does not have an explicit place in documents about the life and formation of Dominican sisters in Latin America and the Caribbean. There are many sisters who have pursued this part of our charism, silently and vigilantly, but although it was always important for formation and education, it has not always been recognised as a means for promoting life in wider fields, that are **more extensive than we could ever have imagined**.

II. A look at the ground covered so far

Our well-known surroundings are not always those which are most effective: a single contem-

plative glance at reality will enable us to find other scenarios where life is prodigiously fruitful. It is contemplation which takes us to study, and study which sends us to research; the privileged place for this encounter is the other, other people, because real life makes us ask questions about things that are passing, things that are happening and things that are changing.

There was a physical place for this encounter in religious tradition, and it was primarily the cell, the room; a privileged and silent place where we allow God to speak to us. In the course of the centuries, and because of the new challenges of mission, the physical place became one of many other kinds of places, like the faces of suffering people, the thirst for dialogue with other beliefs, cultures, etc.

To begin a loving dialogue with someone, the chosen place is always intimacy, which is why, in charismatic experience, the place for listening to the voices of the heart is the cell or interior place of our thoughts and emotions. According to Catherine of Siena, it is in silence and solitude that we listen to the truth; and comprehending it there, we love it. This inner cell is a place of encounter where the divine and the human can meet in sincerity and openness, it is a space for meditation on God's greatness and human insignificance; it is where we recognise our nothingness and the creative providence of Love. The cell is a furnace where human virtue is heated with the divine

fire of prayer, and a forge where creatures are purified and perfected so that they become more like the Lord, grow in his friendship and become more united to him in faith and love². We can also consider the inner cell as the optimum place for women to create and weave their own dreams and desires as their lives go into transformation after their encounter with God.

III. Let us celebrate the present

True Dominican study begins from the demands made on us by mission, and constantly returns to them. St Dominic's charism was given to *promote the preaching of the Gospel*; from this comes the impelling need to study.

The community, or group, is primarily responsible for Dominican study, and is equally primarily responsible for preaching. The community is the environment where we encourage each other in the task of study, however this is put into practice.

The *interdisciplinary* character of our study of theology has its roots in the origins of the Order; there can be no preaching without an attitude of openness and of dialogue with other branches of knowledge. Dominican study is centred in theology, and from there it makes incursions into other areas of knowledge, from a theological viewpoint. The other disciplines of literature, poetry, philosophy, psychology, sociology, the physical sciences etc., which attempt to give meaning to our world, are our allies in the search for God. It must be possible to find God in

the complexity of human experience, because our world, with all its pain and suffering, is ultimately the *fruit of that divine love which first moved all beautiful things* (cf. Letter on Study T. Radcliffe M.O. 1996).

We need to keep in permanent contact and in open and honest dialogue with contemporary thought and the new ways in which knowledge is expressed, and to apply them to real life in appropriate harmony with the just aspirations of our people. We are called to recognise the treasures hidden in the various forms of culture; they manifest the greatness of human beings and open new ways in the search for truth, of which I shall speak later.

Study has a quality of dialogue, which is at times difficult to understand in all its images, examples, symbols and other forms of expression and communication; this dialogue is indispensa-

ble, and language - its instrument - needs to be most carefully considered.

"It is the belief that in the end we can discover some meaning for our lives, a meaning that is not imposed but is already there, waiting to be discovered. It follows from this that study should be above all a pleasure, the pure delight of discovering that things do, despite all the evidence to the contrary, make sense, whether in our own lives or in human history...

To study is itself an act of hope, since it expresses our confidence that there is a meaning to our lives and the sufferings of our people. And this meaning comes to us as a gift, a Word of Hope promising life... The hope that makes us preachers of good news is not a vague optimism, a hearty cheerfulness, whistling in the dark." (Letter on Study)

Study is an act - in the sense of

A meeting for theological reflection by sisters of different Latin-American Dominican Congregations (Chile 2005)



an action involving determined and assiduous application to a particular reality in order to discern its true meaning, its truth. Study has truth for its object; and the search for truth is its flight path.

Therefore "the search for this truth implies that which Lacordaire called, 'the grace of listening to the present'; the critical dialogue with the given context, with social questions, the challenges of justice and peace; the search for this truth leads us to solidarity with the marginalised and the forgotten. The fruit of this search is not primarily great speculative knowledge, but compassion. In this sense, study, for us as Dominicans, is more than acquisition of knowledge; it is part of that continuous conversion to which we are called through our commitment".³

Integral parts of study are:

- taking note of what we have intuited or perceived of reality; its disconcerting, complex, and often contradictory diversity;
- the analysis of its different elements and perceptions, its difficulties and clarities: not in isolation but in context of other realities which are not viewed as dried-up facts set in concrete,

A moment during the meeting "Affective and Sexual Integration in the Project of Dominican Consecrated Life" held at Lima in Peru, 27 June -11 August 2008



but which surprise by their dynamism and inherent possibilities;

- the analytical viewpoint, which evaluates each thing separately and considers their similarities and connections:

- ongoing assessment of our research, lest it happen that our own conceptual explanations do not correspond with reality due to faulty work done previously, or because the reality itself has changed and invalidated our conclusions.

IV. By moving onwards, we build the future

I began to approach the question of the study of Dominican sisters in Latin America and the Caribbean at the request of Sr. Irene Díaz Castro, president of CODALC (Conference of Dominicans in Latin America and the Caribbean) and of Sr. Noemí Zambrano, co-ordinator in the area of Justice and Peace. I first organised the work through a questionnaire sent to addresses given me by the sisters I had come to know in the Theology Convention⁴ organised by CLAR, (Conference of Religious of Latin America) and also to other contacts in Argentina. I managed to amass only a rather limited sample, but it was very useful for me in catching a glimpse of the future resources we already possess.

The sample consisted of ten replies to the questionnaires; the data requested was:

1. Institutional data (name of congregation, year of foundation, name of founder, places where the congregation is present);

2. Prioritised themes in the sisters' formation;
3. Studies completed (grades obtained);
4. Specialised areas of theology;
5. Published work (books and magazine articles);
6. Other specific areas (research projects in which sisters participated).

The subject of this part of the research was the sisters' chosen academic fields and the academic grades obtained; a second stage will analyse the areas of formation chosen by the congregations, study centres, and published work.

The material received was examined according to

- 1) the criterion of the area of theology chosen by the sisters
- 2) the academic grades obtained and
- 3) the relative numbers in each speciality.

1. theological speciality and 2. academic grades

Biblical 3

- 1 studying for Doctorate⁵
- 1 Licenciante
- 1 studying for Licenciante⁶

Dogmatic /Spiritual 5

- 1 Doctorate
- 1 studying for Doctorate
- 2 studying for Licenciante
- 1 Master's⁷

Pastoral 1

- 1 Licenciante

Moral 1

- 1 Doctorate

3. Findings of the ten questionnaires: two sisters are attending doctorate courses, one in Biblical studies and the other in Dogmatic Theology; two sisters have obtained the title of Doctor of Theology, one in Dogmat-



Painting "Sellers of Fire", by Diego Rivera, 1949

ic, the other in Moral Theology. Just one sister is a Master of Dogmatic Theology. Three sisters are attending courses offering material relevant to the licentiate curriculum in theology, two in Dogmatic, one in Biblical studies. Lastly, out of the ten who replied, two have obtained their licence, one in biblical, the other in pastoral theology. These written replies can give us some signposts for our journey. Dominican sisters have entered the academic arena and have invested considerable time in a systematic theological formation which has enabled them to dialogue with other disciplines on the same footing. As for specialisations within the field of theology, we note that formation in dogmatic or systematic theology also includes the area of spirituality (5 out of 10), second place is taken by biblical formation (3 out of 10), and just one sister specialised in moral, just one in pastoral theology. This can only be an incomplete analysis of the place of study in the lives of the Dominican sisters of Latin America.

V. In the scent of flowers we uncover the mysteries, urged on by the Spirit

In conclusion, I am returning to the title of this work; it is meant to disturb and rouse us as we think of and reconsider several Latin American challenges. The scent of flowers represented the presence of the divinity in many different cultures, and in our Catholic tradition it is the presence of Mary, the Mother of God; the sensations we experience carry us away to the presence of the mystery, and the mystery only unfolds by the Spirit's invitation. Study in the Dominican life of Latin America and the Caribbean is very characteristic, drawing us near to the mystery through popular expressions of faith. To study theology puts us before that mystery which only the grace of God can reveal to us; we feel called by the Spirit to live in an attitude of compassionate dialogue with reality, to initiate ways of reflecting and acting in community as a place of life and mission, to be ever ready to keep an attentive eye, a listening ear and an open heart, to let ourselves be challenged by the different, by variety, by many realities at once.

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1. <http://www.dominicastuc.org/predicamos.php>
2. <http://www.dominicos.org/formacion/REFLEXION14-2.HTM>
3. Gabriel Napole, Internet 2009
4. 20-22 June 2009, Bogotá, Colombia. Celebration of 50 years since the creation of the Latin America Conference for Men and Women Religious.
5. Meaning that the sister is gaining relevant credits and writing her doctorate thesis.
6. Meaning that the sister is gaining relevant credits and writing her licentiate thesis.
7. Meaning she is doing post-graduate research.

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