

Letter of the Master of the Order - January 2012

«Go tell my brothers!» (John 20:15): Dominican women and evangelisation



This appeal of the Christ to Mary at the dawn of the resurrection was chosen as the theme for this fourth year of the novena as we prepare to celebrate the Jubilee of the Order. This year titled “Dominican Women and Preaching” invites us to place the announcement of the resurrection at the source of our mission in the Order.

This very simple sentence initially reminded me of the emotion I felt a few years ago in the church of a town in Iraq. Morning had just broken and we were preparing to celebrate the entrance to the novitiate and the profession of some young brothers. A crowd of women were already in the church as they waited for the celebration; among them, there were Dominican mothers, sisters, friends, apostolic sisters and lay women. All together, they filled the church with the dense silence of their prayers while the entire country was suffering from chaos, violence and threats. In that silence and in the presence of the Father, these women prayed with such intensity that at the heart of the chaos, which wreaked havoc in the country and ripped it apart with all sorts of divisions, they conveyed the assurance that nothing can silence the message of life. One day, in this world, dawn broke out in the country of Judaea, through the birth of a child, the Prince of Peace. In spite of appearances, His coming pushed back darkness forever and the night was definitively torn open when, from the depths of a death inflicted on him, He gave his life. Often, in certain parts of the world, where violence repeatedly claims to destroy all social ties, women and mothers act as guardians of life to testify that, in spite of the appearances, no one can claim to become the master of a life that is received, primarily so that it can be given away. Go tell my brothers! Tell them of the strength of life, the unheard story of a humanity that, day after day, is born again in the Spirit of life and given away, through the Passion, all the way to the Resurrection. These women in Iraq showed the vast horizon of the mission of evangelization: to inscribe into the heart of human history the joy and hope of Christ, who gave his life so that the world may live and learn to be his witnesses.

As part of the Dominican family, women – nuns, apostolic sisters, Dominican lay women, and

members of secular institutes – make an essential contribution to the evangelizing mission of the Order. Rather than talk about preaching, I choose the definition of our mission that was given at the time of the foundation of our Order: *totally devoted to the evangelization of the Word of God*. We belong first and foremost to the family of «Preachers», because as men and women we have committed our lives to this adventure of evangelization. All of us, in one way or another, and according to our particular state of life and ministry, choose first a way of «life», and only then do we describe the «actions».

Go tell my brothers! Through this sending, Christ asks Mary and the others to invite the Church to be born from the preaching. This evokes for us the first intuition that preaching will be the foundation of the Order. At the beginning of this new adventure of evangelizing led by Dominic, it is in fact women who first come to join him, followed by the laity, providing for us a picture of the evangelization effort: a sort of “small church,” a community gathered by the power of the spoken Word, gathered to listen to this Word together and to take it to the world. As it occurred with Jesus, according to Luke (8, 1-4), the community gathers at the very moment it has an intuition to become a “community for evangelization.” Even from the beginning, and as strange as it may appear for that time, women were part of the community that had gathered around Jesus. There is no room for the world’s categories when it comes to being disciples. Let us imagine this community that was being formed as it followed Jesus on the first path of evangelization. It went beyond the weaknesses, failures, sins and fragilities that can only be healed by Jesus. The holy preaching is established because of His mercy, felt in so many different ways. By seeing Him live and teach, the disciples probably had many occasions to share the experiences of their personal encounters with Him. And the women of the Gospel had the opportunity to give witness to the words that He had addressed to them: a Word that announces resurrection, one that recognizes faith and the promise of salvation, a Word of life and pardon, of healing and trust. He spoke to them in a heart-felt way, respectful of their femininity and their familiarity with giving life. He was mindful of their capacity to care for and protect fragile life, of the power of their confidence in

creativity and endurance in the face of life's difficulties. The women were with Him along the path leading to Calvary; they waited in the garden, near the tomb, and again they set off along the roads and byways, running to announce to the apostles that He had risen. The mission of evangelization needs this witness and this announcement to help the world hear this Word that carries life within it.

Since its foundation, when the first «Dominican women» came to join Dominic, giving birth to the «holy preaching of Prouilhe», our own «communion for evangelization», the Dominican family, has the need to be composed of men and women, religious and laity, so that it can be an image of the first community that walks along the paths with Jesus, learning from Him how to love and speak to the world, how to seek the Father, receiving everything from Him. All together, with our diversity and complementarity, as well as a mutual respect for differences and the common will to share in equality, we must all carry out this «task of being brothers and sisters», in order to be *signs* in the world and the Church. Ours is a community of brothers and sisters that knows that the equal recognition of each member often suffers because of worldly limitations. In particular, there is still much to do so that everywhere the words of women and men may have equal value, rejecting all injustices and violence that still affect so many women throughout the world. Dominican women, in the adventure of the “holy preaching,” have the task of reminding all, even in the midst of many odds, that the world may not be «at peace» as long as these inequalities are not resolved. We must learn to become sisters and brothers, to identify the injustices, to fight them through this long and beautiful task of listening and of mutual esteem. However, we must also express that evangelization is not mainly a matter of *this* or *that* ministry, rather an invitation to a certain way of life, one which is totally devoted to ensuring that the Word of God be good news for the world. Deep down, we often spend time examining what differentiates us within the Dominican family. Let us instead be attentive to what gathers us and brings us together: the grace of the Word of God, the Word's truth and strength, its life and mercy. Dominican women and preaching? It is first of all our duty to share with them, to be open to all that they have received and achieved through the grace of the “evangelization of the Word of God,” so that the community may be built and consolidated as a common mission.

To speak of Dominican women – nuns, sisters, consecrated women and laity – is, before all else, to speak of the immense role that they have had and continue to have in this task of evangelization, in this engendering of hope through the “evangelization of the Word of God” in the world. The places of prayer and of sisterly/fraternal communion, of contemplation and hospitality, which are the monasteries of the Order, are the foundational stones of the preaching. In these places, the cries and the needs, the distress and the hope of the whole world are brought into the prayers of the sisters and presented to God, the Father. Dominican contemplation is just that – preaching – totally and profoundly. It is impossible to list the countless commitments, friendships and works carried out by the apostolic sisters of the Order. Their presence and actions render the Word *Good News* for their contemporaries, as they concern themselves with searching for ever-new ways to «light the fire» of the Grace of the Spirit in this world. This concern was manifested throughout the centuries by their foundresses or founders, working in contexts where the place of women and their recognition were not always evident. Regarding our sisters in the laity, be it within their families, groups of friends or professional relationships, we see once again their great creativity and diversity being manifest so that the Word may be seen and heard as Good News, thus giving birth to hope in the resurrection.

In speaking of Dominican women and preaching, it is not my desire to elaborate here on the topic of complementarity, which is so evident, nor on the topic of ordination and the ministry of preaching. As you have understood by now, the issue is not primarily what is done, rather what is contributed to the common good of the holy preaching, and how we may together be organized to receive what is offered. Dominican women, I believe – though it is really up to them to say it – bring to the holy preaching a unique experience in their relationship with Christ, a particular manner for studying the Word, a precise way to organize a chapter, a vulnerability regarding what brings life and what causes death in our world, a way to say God.

They also contribute a great diversity in the way that the Dominican intuition is interpreted, as transmitted by their founders, providing us with a dramatic understanding, at a given moment of human history, of the freshness of Dominic's intuition in whatever context and in whatever task

offered in the service of humanity. Go tell my brothers! This is perhaps what our sisters – lay and religious – can teach us, and this could also be, perhaps, what the brothers would like to learn. To learn about the world together, particularly during this year; for the brothers to learn from the sisters, and sisters among themselves, beyond our differences, so that, at the heart of holy preaching in our day, we may thirst for the Word of resurrection. In a family, the strongest and most beautiful ties are often the ones that are woven by the sharing of joys and sorrows, by the mutual offering of shared friendship and support when the world's trials make us doubt whether we know how to find the future. In a family, isn't it often the women who establish the relationships, forging the link among one another, simply because they give life? Are they not the ones who inspire enough confidence so that all the members desire to be born anew – as brothers and sisters, as sons and daughters? And for us, in the family of Dominic, do we not desire to listen to and love the world as daughters and sons of the Father, as the sisters and brothers of humanity, a desire to be in this world as «sacraments of fraternal and sisterly communion»?

Go tell my brothers! I believe that when we speak of Dominican women in their relation to preaching, we must recall the difficult experience that many congregations of apostolic sisters and several monasteries of the Order are facing today. After years of growth and development, there is no sign of relief for the immediate future. We must face this challenge together, supporting one another in his or her own specificity and autonomy, while also witnessing to the fact that the mission of preaching, carried out together, is on one hand the fruit of all that has been sewn before us, and on the other hand, larger than the specific mission of any given institution. I cannot ignore the fact that it may be difficult to face concretely such a test in a realistic and creative manner, without resignation nor obstinacy. We must make an option for true hope in life, even when we perceive death up close, even when a large numbers of houses must be closed, and many beloved sisters laid to rest in the ground. During this transition, we are in absolute need of our solidarity and our unity, so that we can prepare the future of the mission of the holy preaching based on our present strengths. We do this without dreaming about the strengths that are no longer a reality, nor deciding what they should be in the future, but by receiving, with simplicity, the grace of the vocations

that are given, ordering them to the common mission carried out by all. Consecration and religious life must open our hope up as wide as the dimensions of the world, and for the world, freeing us from living paralyzed by either the memory of past glories or the challenge of present difficulties. We often hear that in many parts of the world, apostolic religious life – and thus Dominican as well – is aging significantly and will not succeed in renewing itself as it did in the past. Certainly, but there is a great adventure to be lived in old age, when one can be grateful for having borne much fruit for the life of the Church and for so many human communities: Can we together learn to be carried away by the lightness of our giving thanks, rather than be discouraged by the weight of the lost future? Above all, and we firmly believe this, the holy preaching has the need – an absolute need – for the contribution of Dominican women who totally consecrate their lives to it. It is by being gathered together, therefore, and building on what is already very much alive among us, that we must prepare the framework for this preaching. This need, this urgency – to call women to join the mission of the Order under its many different forms – is the responsibility of all the members of the Dominican family, men as well as women.

Just like the preaching in the days of Jesus, or like that of the apostolic times, or when the Order was founded, and now at this time in which the Church is emphasizing the urgency of evangelization, the family of Saint Dominic, «the family for evangelization» has today more than ever the duty of joining together brothers and sisters who «preach the Word». Go tell my brothers...

A Good and Happy New Year to all!

Rome, January 13, 2012
fr. Bruno Cadoré O. P.
Master of the Order