

THE GREAT TRADITIONS OF CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY – PART III

THE DOMINICAN TRADITION – THE DANCE OF FAITH AND REASON

I. St. Dominic founded the Dominican order, more formally called the Order of Preachers, to help teach and ground the true faith in faith and reason, service and prayer.

A. Saint Dominic de Guzman (1170-1221) was an Augustinian canon (a sort of monk) at the cathedral in Osma, Spain at about the same time as St. Francis= life. In combating heresies, he came up with the inspiration for this order.

1. In 1204, while traveling with his bishop Diego to help arrange a royal wedding, he was passing through southern France, where Albigensians (a sort of Gnostic sect) held sway. By prayer, argumentation, patience and an exemplary life, they were able to reconvert most of the heretics.

2. From this experience, St. Dominic realized his mission to form a preaching order, which was confirmed by Pope Innocent III and, when he died, Pope Honorius III in 1216.

3. They would live very simple lives as a mendicant order, that is, they would keep very little property and ask for alms. There was a strong focus on learning and prayer, but a learning and prayer that would make them more able to teach and serve.

B. In the thirteenth century, the great universities were expanding and knowledge of philosophy and science was growing rapidly.

1. Thus, the liberal arts, led by studies of logic, grammar and rhetoric, and flowing up with studies of geometry, music, mathematics and astronomy, were central in education.

2. The rediscovery of many of Aristotle's works had led to a revival of philosophy, which was very helpful, but also tempted people to separate completely the pursuit of truth in the world from faith.

3. Starting with St. Anselm (1033-1109), Archbishop of Canterbury, and the conflicted theologian Peter Abelard, Scholasticism had taken hold. That method of study and debate emphasized considering contrasting points of view, especially in theology, and trying to sanctify them. There was some skepticism that this sort of scholarship was leading to an intellectual pridefulness and a neglect of the moral life, a perennial concern about universities
4. The Dominicans tried to sanctify this growing knowledge by combining it with faith and prayer, so that both the secular and theological realms could benefit each other.
5. Saint Albert the Great (1206-1280), a second generation Dominican who taught at the Universities of Paris and Cologne (and was also briefly bishop of Ratisbon), is among the founders of modern science. He described numerous types of animals (including the first description of the arctic bear and the weasel) and considered the study of science to be a noble concern.
 - a. Although an admirer of Aristotle, he did not want simply to accept what had been thought, but rather to test it by experiments. For example, he knew the ancient conclusions well, but would often rebut them with such comments as "We have shown this to be false by experiment" or "but this has not been sufficiently proved by a certain experiment."
 - b. He also believed in miracles, but said that the study of them and the study of science are different.
 - c. He also systematized the study of morals, emphasizing that much of what can be known by faith is also known by reason.
 - d. In 1941, Pope Pius XII declared him to be the patron saint for scientists, saying that he inspires people to "discern the presence of God in all the forces of nature and, in meditation and veneration, admire the

incorruptible rays of His splendor."

C. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) was the greatest theologian among the Dominicans and with St. Augustine, has dominated Catholic theology ever since.

1. He was from a high noble family based in the city of Aquina in northern Italy. Knowing his devotion, his family intended to have him become a Benedictine monk at Monte Cassino, the central Benedictine monastery in the world.

2. However, he discerned God's calling to be a Dominican and eventually wore down his family's resistance. At first, because of his quiet demeanor, he was considered a slow student at the University Paris, being called "the dumb ox." However, St. Albert the Great soon realized his brilliance and ensured that he would rise to the heights of theological teaching.

4. He systematized theology in his masterpiece the Summa Theologica, which, along with his other writings, have been central to Catholic teaching ever since. At the Council of Trent, which responded to the Protestant Reformation, the Summa was placed just below the Bible in the general meetings.

- He used heavily the philosophy of Aristotle, along with Plato, and the theology of the Church fathers, especially St. Augustine, whom he referred to as "the theologian."

5. Among many other things, he provided the theology behind the sacraments, which was especially helpful in explaining the Eucharist, has often been adopted by the Church, especially at the Council of Trent.

6. His moral theology was organized along the virtues, and emphasized sin as diminishing human nature.

7. His Scriptural commentaries, especially the Cantenea Aurea, which gathered commentaries of the Church fathers, emphasized the many different levels of meanings in the Bible.

E. St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) was a devout young woman and the youngest daughter of a wealthy family during a century that was experiencing disasters, such as the Hundred Year=s War, the papacy away from Rome, and the Black Death. Joining a branch of the Dominicans, she brought a greater understanding of the faith to a difficult century.

1. Opposing her family=s desire for a noble marriage, she became a third order Dominican, i.e., one that would join in the spirituality of the Dominicans but live in the world.
2. In addition to guiding the families of Siena and the surrounding areas to live at peace with each other, serving plague victims with astonishing strength, and guiding the papacy to return to Rome, she wrote her Dialogues, conversations with Jesus.
3. She emphasized very much a constant desire of prayer, describing that connection with God as being as the inner circle of a wheel; all other desires are meant to be distributed proportionally around it.
4. She very strongly emphasized knowing oneself in the light of Jesus, focusing on His presence and asking what He thinks of one=s life. Progress of prayer is measured not in feeling, but in charity.

II. Dominican emphasizes growth through connecting together study, prayer, teaching and a sense of the mystery of God.

A. Dominican morality is based heavily upon the notion that the moral law helps us attain human perfection and indeed even a sharing in divine life

1. In St. Thomas' Summa, he organizes moral theology according to the virtues, with additional emphasis on the beatitudes and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Dominicans thus describes sins are contrary to the virtues. The moral law is thus designed to make us more perfect. See Matthew 5:48.

2. Building upon Aristotle's view, he describes virtues as excellences, or perfections, of human nature. Vices then are those things that contradict virtue and thus keep us from this excellence. See, e.g., Summa Theologica, Part II-I question 55, 70. But he adds to Aristotle's philosophy that God works "in us, without us," i.e. with our cooperation but also, through grace before and above it. He thus enables us to achieve a goodness that is consistent with our nature, but infinitely above our abilities

3. In the Summa and elsewhere, he also describes the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the beatitudes as building even further on the virtues to allow us to enjoy "connaturality" with God, that is an experience of the divine even on earth. See, e.g., Summa Theologica II-I question 68, art. 1-2.

4. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, peity, and fear of the Lord. See Is. 11. In describing their effects, St. Thoams cites a passage in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, in which he describes people who are "heroic, indeed divine."

5. The Beatitudes, described especially in Matthew 5:2-8, likewise, give us a first promise of the joy of the saints in heaven, a joy that is available to everyone. See Summa Theologica II-I, question

6. One thus sees the law of God, expressed in Scripture, the Church, and other reasoning, not as a burden, but as guidance to this heroism and joy.

7. And our calling is thus to practice each of the virtues, the Beatitudes, see Matthew 5:2-8, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, see Isaiah 11, as perfections of human nature. As one always seeks to develop skills in any field (e.g., scholarly, professional, artistic, athletic) one should continually attempt to develop the skill of being a **Aprofessional@** at holiness. See 1 Tim. 2:4-6.

B. Dominican spirituality is thus very much based very much on contemplation and action, the two complementing each other. There is a very strong sense that nature and grace, faith and reason support each other.

1. But there is also a strong notion that we can get nowhere unless we put our faith into practice, especially in teaching. As St. Catherine of Siena, a third order Dominican of the fourteenth century said "There is not virtue nor any faith, which is not manifested by means of one's neighbor." St. Thomas emphasized that, while contemplation is in itself higher than action, God will not grant that contemplation unless we respond to His will.

2. Dominicans understand that we can begin with the experience of the world and rise to God. When we see His goodness in creatures, we form concepts to understand Him better, and gradually rise even above those concepts towards greater and greater understanding of God.

C. There is a great focus on faith and reason complementing each other in the pursuit of truth, and all truth working together.

1. As St. Thomas Aquinas emphasized over and over again, God is the author of both the faith and reason, and would never contradict Himself. As a result, faith and reason can never finally be in conflict. Rather, each one assists the other. As Pope John Paul II said at the beginning of his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, "Faith and reason are like two wings of a bird on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth." In that encyclical, he dedicated an entire section to the "enduring originality of the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas," which emphasized how he brought out the harmony of faith and reason.

2. We need the teachings of the Church, especially in theology, because human reason is limited, both individually and as a whole. Because reason can only go so far, and can go astray, Scripture and the Church guide us to a greater ability to understand the truth. See [Summa Theologica](#) I question 1 article 1.

a. The teachings of the Church thus enables anyone, theologian or not, to enter deeply into the truths of God. As St. Thomas said in his commentary on the Apostle's Creed, "Before Christ's coming no philosopher by his entire sustain effort could have known as much about God and the truths necessary for salvation as can a humble old woman now that Christ has come."

b. Such teachings allow us theologians to use their own reason creatively without going entirely off on their own. We

thus avoid either the divisions of the more liberal tradition, which allows any interpretation of the faith, or the constraints of fundamentalism.

3. Reasoning is also essential to understand the faith better, and to be able to explain it to the world. As St. Anselm (a Benedictine, but one whose thought would inspire Dominicans) said, "I believe that I may understand; and I understand that I may believe better."

a. Even when the same truth is understood by both faith and reason, it is perceived in different ways and perspectives and thus sinks in more deeply. As St. Albert said, "Whatever is understood in two ways instead of one is better grasped; hence, what is understood by faith and reason is better understood than that which is known only by faith." Summa 3rd treatise, part I. Understanding some doctrines by reason does not diminish the need for faith, for faith is in the end placed in God, especially through Christ, and not in the teachings alone. Thus, even if (as is impossible) one understood every teaching by reason alone, the See St. Thomas, Summa Theologica II-II question 11, article 1

b. Reasoning is also always crucial if we are to present the faith to the world. As St. Peter says, "Always be ready to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is within you." 1 Peter 3:15.

c. It is also crucial to understand our faith, and its implications better and better. While it is true that a person with very limited intellect can be holy, using the intellect we have well is essential if we are really to advance toward God. For we cannot love God, or His Church, or His people, without knowing them. The faith allows us to know He whom we love better and better and, by that knowledge, to love Him more. Thus, for example, Scripture will be more delightful, prayer with the saints deeper, the Providence of God clearer with more understanding.

D. Dominican spirituality highly honors this advance in this learning the faith, emphasizing that it requires great effort, patience and self-control.

1. Thus, for example, there is a notion that we should try to understand different points of view and try, even when a point of view is in error, to see what is right in it. For no idea can appeal to the intellect unless there is some truth in it. Furthermore, even accurate views should be developed further. St. Thomas Aquinas once said, *Rarely affirm completely, never deny completely, always distinguish.*

- The Dominicans, and especially St. Thomas, mastered the approach of Scholasticism, which involved describing the views opposed to one's own conclusion and trying to adapt as much as possible of it to one's own through careful distinctions and subtle reasoning. In addition, in Scholastic thought, especially as used by St. Thomas, it was crucial to begin by describing opposing views accurately, and then see how they can be improved.

2. The Dominican approach highly values broad learning, but does not rely heavily on authority for its own sake, except that of Scripture and the Church. There is an attempt to find truth wherever it may lie, but always true to the faith.

a. Thus, there is a notion that learning in all legitimate fields can contribute to our understanding of the faith. For example, St. Albert used analogies from science commonly. And St. Thomas relied heavily upon the philosophy of Aristotle, Plato, the Jewish theologian Maimonides, and the Muslim theologian Averroes.

b. Likewise, the broad range of commentaries on the faith should be consulted, rather than being overly attached to any one of them. The Vatican II Council took up this idea, as well as the need to remain faithful to the Church and the consistency of Scripture when it said in *Dei Verbum* 12 that three principles must guide all interpretation of the Scriptures: (1) the unity of the Bible, such that one passage is read consistently with another; (2) the teachings of the Church believe as a matter of faith; and (3) the tradition of the entire Church, insofar as the broad range of wisdom throughout time and space is highly valued. Within that context, the Council then encouraged modern research and commentaries to develop this wisdom further.

3. There is also a great interrelationship between prayer and study. Dominicans commonly pray between classes and studies.

a. St. Thomas told St. Bonaventure that his brilliance came not primarily by his studies or intelligence, but above all as a gift given in prayer.

- b. Some Dominicans do writing in the chapel. Prayer is meant to be intelligent, and theological research is not simply an academic exercise, but should draw us closer to God.
- c. Even secular studies should be dedicated to God, and prayer will help perfect them.

4. There is also a notion that virtues are needed for the intellect to function properly and that sins and vices lead to errors and poor reasoning.

5. In addition, while sloth is one barrier to true learning, a more common barrier is curiositas, an undisciplined desire for knowledge (e.g. looking up every random piece of news, concern about gossip, focusing on who is getting ahead, or what is in fashion.) People naturally want knowledge, but tend to spend their time learning irrelevancies or even harmful things, or jumping to conclusions, rather than focusing on what is important.

6. Dominican spirituality also recognizes very strongly that there is a mystery of God beyond our understanding that we must simply kneel before. St. Thomas Aquinas, near the end of his life, saw a vision of heaven and said, "All I have seen things, and things have been revealed to me, that make everything I have written look like straw." Some fourteenth century theologians, including the Rhineland mystics (Meister Eckhardt, Johannes Tauler, and Blessed Henry Suso) would emphasize the idea of going above concepts, simply being with God and finding God in all work.

F. Overall, Dominican has a strong sense of unifying all aspects of life: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. One should ask how our actions, friendships, tastes, environment, and so forth affect our prayer, and how prayer affects them.