



Dominican Studies

Aquinas Institute of Theology's Convocation Address: "On Being a Dominican School"



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This article gives a short and powerful summary of how three key Dominican principles—pursuing truth, speaking truthfully, and being true to one another—are integral to the life of a healthy Dominican educational institution. It was given as the convocation address at Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, MO at the start of the school year in 2011.

I realize that each of us has our own story to tell about how we came to end up in this particular room on this particular day. I personally came to Aquinas Institute after mysteriously receiving a summer session advertisement in the mail.... Not really an unusual path to graduate school, unless you consider that at the time I was living in Guam. How I got to be on the Aquinas mailing list, I will never really know. But my brand new husband at the time said, "I think you should go there and see if you can save your faith."

I was a young Catholic school teacher and in my first two years of teaching, I had seen the school get battered by a typhoon, not one time but five. I was fairly certain that there was inappropriate sexual conduct going on between one of the teachers and a student. The school secretary had been accused of embezzling

\$50,000. And the pastor had developed the habit of locking himself in his bedroom for 23 ½ out of 24 hours a day, coming out only to say Mass, and only if it wasn't too hot.

Saving my faith was probably a very good idea at that point.

I didn't know any Dominicans when I came to Aquinas, nor heard of their passion for saving peoples' faith. I had a picture of St. Dominic in the saint book I had read as a child. I knew he had a dog and a torch. I wasn't sure what that was about. So suffice it to say, I arrived at Aquinas a fairly clean slate with regard to Dominican spirituality. I hadn't come to Aquinas because of its Dominican identity; I came because it was located near my parents where I had free housing, and later, a major source of free babysitting.

But if I *were* as informed *then* as I am *now* 17 years later, and if I had *had* the financial & geographical freedom *then* that I have *now*, I would again choose – with much greater intentionality than I did *then* - to study theology in a Dominican institution.

I say this because I have come to believe so strongly that the disposition the Dominican heritage cultivates in theologians serves the theological task exceedingly well, and furthermore, sustains a life of ministry even in trying times.

This afternoon, I would like to speak to that Dominican heritage as I have come to understand it. I want to highlight three dimensions of this heritage that I believe serve the student of theology and ministry in an extraordinary way - dimensions that we as faculty and administration should aspire to consistently model and nurture in fidelity to our Dominican institutional identity.

I describe these core characteristics as follows:

- Pursuing truth;
- Speaking truthfully; and,
- Being true to one another.

Allow me to outline each of these in greater depth.

Pursuing Truth

The Dominican motto, as you well know, is "Veritas" – Truth.

This seems straightforward enough, until one tries to give a definition of what Truth is, at which point we find ourselves somewhat at a loss of words – not unlike Augustine when he was asked to give a definition of "time." "When no one is asking me, I know exactly what time is," he said, "but as soon as someone asks me what time is, I don't know how to respond."

The classical definition of truth, articulated well by Thomas Aquinas, still finding a home in *Webster's Dictionary* today, defines truth as "being in accordance with the actual state of affairs; the body of real things, events, and facts." In Thomas' words: "*Veritatis est adaequatio rei et intellectus*" – or, "Truth is the adequation of things and intellect."

The Dominican quest for truth is the quest to come to know what is real... At its most essential level, the quest implies engagement of the world – coming to know through one's senses what actually exists. It implies experiencing life in all of its nooks and crannies. What is there out there to be known? What do I see? What do I hear? What can I learn?

The Dominican mind fears no knowledge, avoids no knowledge, because if it is real, the Dominican mind is interested in it. Dominicans love philosophy because philosophy – in its broadest, original sense – encompasses all human knowledge: mathematics, physics, music, biology, literature. It sees all human study as a “handmaiden” in the continual pursuit of what is real.

But the pursuit of the real is more than just the acquisition of lots of information; it inevitably begins to surface hard questions, like “*What is really real?*” In essence, what do I do with the bits that I discover that don't fit into what I already know? What do I do about the fact that two of us who are both studying the same thing come to different conclusions about reality? Is there more than what I am seeing? If I find out something is *more* true, can I let go of what I *thought* was true... even if I like it a *whole, whole lot*?

The Oxford Dominican Herbert McCabe captures this aspect of the quest well when he says, in the end, “you must love the real more than the true.” I don't think he means to pit the two against each other here because eventually they are synonymous; I think he is simply emphasizing – if you really *love* Truth... if you really claim Truth as your motto, you've got to always be open to finding out something that would make you let go of what you think now, even though that letting go might be very painful indeed.

You have to love what really *is* more than what you would like to be.

The pursuit of truth... if one is really serious about it... is always a Paschal journey. You are going to find out things you didn't actually want to know when it comes right down to it. And sometimes the pieces aren't all going to fit, and not all make sense, and sometimes seem contradictory. And if you really value truth above all else, you will need to learn to live in a place of radical incoherence for periods of time, sometimes long periods of time. And *still* you must desire to know what is *really real*.

The Dominican intuition is that beyond the last digit of pi, beyond the farthest star at the edge of the universe, beyond the tiniest atom, beyond the morass and all the pieces of the puzzle that we can't understand, beyond what the senses are able to grasp,

there is something even more, an Ultimate Reality that does not contradict what we have perceived by the senses, but is nevertheless far beyond them. And this “something” is not a “thing” at all, but a Who – not an object, but a subject.

And in the end, *this* reality flavors how we talk about “knowledge” in a Dominican context. When we talk about “knowing God” we are not talking about the same kind of knowledge as knowing a chemical formula or all of the countries of Africa. We aren't even talking about knowing all of the Vatican II documents or the entirety of the catechism.

We are talking about relational knowledge. Biblical knowledge. Knowledge as Mary hints at when she says, “How can this be? I do not *know* man.” Intimate knowledge, heart knowledge, gut knowledge. The Italian Dominican Dalmazio Mongillo, who taught at the Angelicum in Rome for many years, notes: “Christianity has become very messed up. People think it is about rules and regulations. No, Christianity is about the enjoyment of a Person.”

There is a difference to knowing *about* Jesus Christ and *knowing* Jesus Christ.

In sum, when a school seeks to embrace a Dominican disposition to learning, it embraces the pursuit of truth wholeheartedly. It does not restrict any direction of inquiry, even though it might seem frivolous or ill-conceived. If the pursuer is genuine in his or her love of truth and willing to keep pursuing, keep asking questions, keep letting go when discovering something more true, then eventually all roads lead to the same place. Rather than restricting, a Dominican school instead helps its students (and faculty – because we are all learners here) in their truth pursuits by asking hard questions and cultivating critical thought: “Have you considered this piece of information? What would be the implications of that direction for this issue?”

Yet, Dominican schools - while well known for being intellectually rigorous and for nurturing the life of the mind - cannot stop there. At the same time, the Dominican heritage reminds us that knowledge of the Ultimate Reality is not solely, or even primarily, a question of a sharp mind; it requires a capacity for relationship. Dominican education engages the head, but if it is genuine about the pursuit of truth, it must be just as attentive to enhancing students’ (and again, I would add “faculty’s”) capacities for relationship.

This brings me to the next two points, both of which I believe are very Dominican, but perhaps have evoked less explicit reflection in conversation about Dominican education.

Speaking truthfully

Dominicans are known in history not just for being great pursuers of truth – burning the midnight oil scouring Aristotle like Thomas or conducting fantastical research projects like Albert traveling the countryside. They are not known just for looking and hearing and touching and taking it all in. They are also known as preachers – “*contemplari et contemplata aliis trader*” / contemplating, and giving the fruits of their contemplation.

Dominican experience over the course of the past 800 years has much to teach us about the power of speech – both about speech that has served the Church well, and speech that has not. One of the things that I believe is clearer at this moment in history than perhaps it has ever been is that there must be a consonance between the content that we wish to communicate and the method we use to communicate it. (eg. There is something not quite right when a teacher instills quiet in a classroom by yelling, “Be quiet!!”) We must always be looking for ways of speaking about truth that are consonant with the Truth we encounter. There is an intimate relationship between pursuing truth and committing ourselves to speak truthfully.

Like defining truth, trying to speak truthfully is harder than it first appears. A few clues picked up over time about consonance:

First, God, as St. John says, is love. And love, by its very nature, is not coercive, it cannot be forced. It always allows the other to freely respond. No one wants to be “loved” by someone whose been commanded to do so. Being perfect love, there is no violence in God, no coerciveness in God. And so it must be with our speech. Speaking truthfully implies a simplicity in which persons try to say what they see as accurately as possible, without manipulation, without twisting, without pressure, without obfuscation.

Sometimes in academia there can be a temptation to try to use one’s language to impress, even sometimes to confuse others. There is no space for that in a Dominican school. Speaking truthfully means being as clear as one can be, open about one’s intent, without guile or duplicity. It implies transparency. It implies vulnerability – open to the fact that the other might not respond as desired.

At the same time, as we strive for clarity, it is also helpful to remember that God - as Thomas and Eckhart and so many others would remind us - is mystery, a living mystery. Our speech must be very careful because we are never going to pin God down and wrap God up in a tidy box. A butterfly that has been pinned to the scientist's collection board is no longer really a butterfly. We gather a clue about truthful speech by looking at Jesus, who when trying to communicate great mysteries always spoke in parable – not because he was hiding things and trying to be ambiguous, but because when you are dealing with great mysteries – parable is the best speech can do.

In our own speech, we must guard against speaking too definitively, avoiding exaggeration. Not pretending to know what we do not. Not conveying mastery of what is not master-able. Acknowledging what we still wonder about. Of course the Dominican maxim comes to mind: "Seldom affirm, never deny, always distinguish."

As well as Don Goergen's comment, oft repeated to me, "Ann, you cannot expect more clarity than the subject matter itself allows."

Lastly, God, as Catherine of Siena highlights repeatedly, is mercy – "slow to anger, rich in compassion." Our speech should put each other in the best light possible, assuming charitable motive. It should not back the other into a corner or seek to embarrass the other in their error, but allow them space to explain themselves, to change their mind if they want to. Open *us* to changing *our* minds if we are persuaded to do so.

Again, in sum, bringing a Dominican disposition to the study of theology implies that we are intensely careful and thoughtful in our speech – about God and to God, about one another and with one another. My own experience of living in a Dominican educational community these past two decades has led me to keep the Bible and the book *Difficult Conversations* next to each other in the most-frequently-referenced section of my bookshelf. One tells me what I believe; the other gives me a compatible way to communicate it.

Being true to one another

This last point is the most tender for me to speak about, for it is the characteristic that I think the larger public knows least about when considering Dominican education, but it is perhaps the most central of them all.

If it is true, as Mongillo asserted, that Christianity at its very core is about enjoyment of a Person, then it makes sense that enjoyment, particularly enjoyment of persons – a.k.a. friendship - is at the heart of Dominican life. We learn lots of things from text books and from reading and from observation of the world. But there is a particular kind of education that happens in the context of friendship. In my first moral theology class here, we read that friendship is the school of virtue. It has taken me a long, long time to understand what that means. And I am still learning what it means. So for now, just etch that in your memory: friendship is the school of virtue.

Dominican history is filled with friendships from its very origins, and between persons that you might not expect, across boundaries not often crossed. Fifty some odd letters have been preserved between Jordan of Saxony, Dominic's successor in the Order, and Diana d'Andalo, one of the first Dominican women.

In Dominican life, friendship is the place where we learn the truth about ourselves and others and what it means to be in relationship. If we proclaim God as Trinity – *i.e. if we proclaim that God in God's very being*

is relationship - there is no truth more pressing to pursue than the truth discovered in friendship. It is where we practice the love that we preach. It is where we find out about God at the experiential level.

Real friendship is a difficult thing to achieve, yet it is the most fertile soil for the theological endeavor. It is in the free sharing that happens around a table that great new insights are born and fallacies are gently pointed out and let go. We can make mistakes and still be loved. We can test out ideas without fear. Competition fades. We become more daring and free in our theological explorations.

Dominican educational settings, while striving for high professional standards, should continue to model the ethos of the institution on the paradigm of friendship. Any policy or process that diminishes the potential for collaboration and the nurturing of friendship among students and/or faculty goes contrary to the fundamental impulse of Dominican education. Our classroom environments – whether physical or online – and our common faculty life are to be constructed in such a way that they are not simply about mastery of content but enjoyment of persons. The two - content and relationship - don't need to be pitted against one another; rather we acknowledge that learning is strongest when pursued in the context of genuine community.

Pursuing truth

Speaking truthfully

Being true to one another

These three practices, learned from the Dominicans I have encountered and studied, have profoundly shaped my vocation as a theologian and person of faith. They are something that I have been privileged to witness in action here at Aquinas. At the same time, they always stand before us as a challenge to be more fully realized. Students and Faculty, these characteristics of the Dominican project have now been entrusted to us in this new school year that we are about to begin. They have an 800 year history. How shall they flourish now... *this* year... here in *this* place?

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