

LIFE AND MISSION: FIDELITY AND PERSONAL SATISFACTION



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1. Evangelical Fidelity and personal satisfaction.

Our religious profession implies two dimensions: our life and our mission. In Dominican life, it appears impossible to mark the boundaries between life and mission since everything in Dominican life is based on the evangelizing mission.

However, two very important matters are at stake in our life and mission: fidelity to the gospel and apostolic effectiveness, on the one hand; and on the other hand, our level of personal satisfaction. Here too, it is difficult to mark the boundaries between both issues. They either go together or separately, depending on our understanding of personal satisfaction and the quality of our personal life. Personal satisfaction that does not contemplate solidarity in suffering is not compatible with evangelical fidelity.

This is what I will reflect upon. Fidelity to the Gospel in our life and mission, is a necessary reflection today no matter what generation you belong to. Evangelical fidelity is demanded of us through our baptism and our religious profession. It is the only thing that brings meaning to our life. It is the exact measure of the radicalism and seriousness of our Christian life. That is where we must search for the identity of our religious life.

I also consider this reflection to be necessary today because the issue of personal satisfaction and quality of life is at stake. This matter seems increasingly critical to the vocational summons and the testimony of life that new candidates are searching for. Candidates are attracted to this lifestyle only if they perceive happiness and satisfaction in religious life. However, the issue of quality of life and personal satisfaction is extremely ambiguous and it has been managed differently by the different generations that have followed one another in religious and Dominican life after the Council (this is the bit of history which I know by experience).

The liberal generation, that is, people born as of 1943, according to the vocational study carried out in the USA, was in general terms the generation of incarnation, of secularization, commitment, work and activism. We do not doubt its generosity. To consider life based on personal satisfaction seemed like betraying the Gospel. This generation did not allow one to seek personal satisfaction because any personal enjoyment had a certain taste of bourgeoisie; it got through the interpretation of religious life as sacrifice; however it may not have been able,, or did not allow itself, to make concessions to the ideal of personal happiness.

On the other hand, the post-modern generation, that is, according to the same US report, individuals born as of the 80's, considers personal happiness, personal satisfaction, and quality of life as primary rights that cannot be given up. In their absence, religious life loses its entire meaning and there will be sufficient reason to abandon evangelical fidelity. (This is how we could attempt to explain the vocational coming and going of the new generations, the continuous entries and exits, the many vocational crises...).

That is why I deem it fundamental to analyze our life and mission today from the standpoint of evangelical fidelity, as well as from the standpoint of quality of life or

personal satisfaction. (Both ideals prevail in the searches of new candidates: they demand a radical evangelical life and they also ask for happiness in religious life).

2. Significance of quality of life and personal satisfaction in religious life.

This ideal of quality of life seems too secular. It is diligently cultivated by the welfare and consumer society. It is even dreamed of with enthusiasm by the societies of malaise. For these, quality of life is associated to good health, good nutrition, good homes, good vacations, good diets, good workout, good-looking people... All these aspirations are legitimate; in principle, they could be compatible with the Gospel; these are not a sin. Quality of life, personal satisfaction and happiness are associated with the development of external senses, gratifying sensations, pleasure and comfort. Good tastes, good environmental music, environmental aromas, designs that please the eye, smooth surfaces... The mistake of the welfare society is to believe that cultivating these gratifying sensations will guarantee happiness. Experience proves that this is a serious mistake: many people in the welfare society have all the conditions to be happy, however, happiness is always too far to be reached. A number of your reports denounce comfort, materialism and consumerism as temptations that can be found in some Dominican communities.

This ideal of quality of life has also been gaining room in religious life. It is a legitimate ideal; it is not a sin. We have the right and the obligation to search for quality of life, for us and for the others. God wants His children to be happy, "felicisimos". This is not incompatible with evangelical fidelity. Only a religious life that is joyful and happy can give credit to vocation and has the capacity to be a vocational calling.

However, in religious life, quality of life consists of two different and complementary dimensions. Firstly, it makes reference to the evangelical quality of the life of religious people. A life with quality means, in this case, a life that keeps to the fundamental needs of our Christian baptism and our religious profession: a life of faith, hope and charity; a life of evangelical poverty, chastity and obedience; a life of fraternity and sorority and of generous service to humanity. Here are the keys that enable us to search for the identity of religious life, the theological basis of the same, the reason for being, the source of meaning. I believe this is what your reports ask for when you speak of the following Challenges: to search for the identity of religious life, to base life on the four pillars of Dominican life, to recover the ideal of sanctity and the theology of life, to offer candidates a testimony of evangelical life.

However, the ideal of quality of life in religious life is acquiring another meaning that is also important. It is related to the level or degree of personal satisfaction in religious people. A quality life is a life capable of providing personal satisfaction, a life in which the deepest personal satisfactions are associated with one's own vocation, with life in community, with the apostolic mission. This personal satisfaction is compatible with suffering and renunciations. However, it is expressed as enthusiasm, optimism, joy, apostolic zeal. On the other hand, the lack of quality of life and personal satisfaction manifests itself as a lack of enthusiasm, lack of optimism, deep sadness, bitterness, monotony, and existential apathy, what monasticism called "monastic sourness" ...

Consequently, as we try to clear the ambiguity of this ideal of quality of life, what is at stake when we talk about quality of life in religious and Dominican life is not insignificant. A search for increasingly higher levels of personal satisfaction is not optional. We are not forbidden to be happy in religious life. Happiness is a right and a personal obligation.

In religious and Dominican life we measure our evangelical quality of life and personal satisfaction at three basic levels: at the personal level it basically depends on the experience of faith, the source of meaning and motivation in this lifestyle; at the community level, it basically depends on the quality of life together; at the apostolic level, it depends on the generous dedication to the mission and on the capacity to enjoy the mission.

3. Quality of life. Faith and the world of meaning.

The Jewish Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl passed away a few years ago; he was a survivor from concentration camps and the Nazi extermination. This psychoanalyst wrote a booklet in which he spoke about his dramatic experiences and those of his companions in concentration camps. He entitled it *Man's Search for Meaning*. During the first months of the year 2000, there would be someone reading this book in the Madrid subway almost every morning. I also read it with great pleasure and a great deal of benefit.

The fundamental theory in the book could be expressed as follows: "The fundamental problem of the human being is not the lack of pleasure, rather the lack of meaning. You can live without pleasure; but with no meaning there will only be room for suicide". Even though it may sound like a strong allegation, you could not express this concept better with fewer words. This reflection could apply to religious life today (without, of course, encouraging anyone to commit suicide, but to search for meaning). For instance, applying this theory to vows in religious life raises questions: What is the issue about vows for many religious: the lack of pleasure or the lack of meaning? What sense do vows have if we find no meaning to them? Why sacrifice if we have not found the Kingdom, if there has not been a real experience of encountering the Resurrected?

Gordon Allport, who wrote the prologue to the book in question, says that sometimes Viktor Frankl would greet his patients at his office with the following question: "Why don't you commit suicide?" The question sounds powerful and brutal, but it had its meaning. Once the patients recovered from their scare they provided answers such as: I don't commit suicide because my children are still small, because the company is not sufficiently strong yet, because I can imagine how much my wife would suffer... etc. Then the psychiatrist would start his "speech therapy" work in the search for meaning: "You still have some reason to continue living, your life still has meaning" The question of meaning was so transcendental for this author, that among those who had the opportunity to survive concentration camps, the only ones who survived were those who found meaning to their suffering. Meaning was more important for survival than pleasure.

I suppose this sounds too exaggerated for religious life and that most of us Dominicans are not at these extremes of lack of meaning, despair and suicide. However, two facts are increasingly relevant concerning religious life.

We sometimes hear the following expression in communities: "This makes no sense". I have sometimes heard it in the confessional as well. Despite all the deficiencies of the sacrament of reconciliation, it is however a moment in which we usually bring out the deepest expressions of our own life. That expression is the sound of an alarm. It uncovers the issue of identity in religious and Dominican life to which several reports refer.

Secondly, we sometimes perceive a certain environmental sadness in religious communities that does not pertain to cyclical or temporary crises, rather to a certain personal and institutional disillusionment, to a lack of meaning.

Both facts indicate that the level of quality of life or personal satisfaction is low in some members of religious life. I am not talking about the moral level, bad people or unfaithful people, dissolute religious. I am simply talking about the possibility that a lack of meaning may bring about the deepest crisis, the most profound origin of a sadness that is encrusted in the soul.

In other lifestyles, the sources of meaning may be different: in married life, children, professional success, financial prosperity may be sources of meaning. In religious life, the only certain source of meaning is faith, that is, the experience of faith. Without it, poverty, chastity, obedience, community life and mission make no sense. That is why, presently, the greatest challenge in religious and Dominican life is the challenge of faith. F. Tillard was already saying this in the 70's: The fundamental problem of religious life is not the issue of poverty, nor the one of chastity or obedience; it is the problem of faith, because that is where we play out the meaning or lack of it in our life.

A certain atmosphere of secularization has taken possession of religious life during the post-council period: this weakened the faith of many religious people thereby exhausting their source of meaning. We must not confuse faith with pity nor with a religious feeling or moral perfection. It is not simply about being more merciful or fervent or more perfect. It is about believing more and finding the source of meaning in a faith that "springs and flows, even at night", as said Saint John of the Cross. It is about finding the foundation of our life and mission in faith. There is where we'll find the whole meaning of the evangelical image of the house built on rock, or the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan or the scene of the disciples of Emmaus, or the faith of those who bring down the paralytic from the roof.

The scene of the disciples from Emmaus is especially significant to clarify the boundary between meaningful and meaningless as to the following of Jesus. This scene has often been associated with the theme of catechesis, hospitality, Eucharist. And it has often led to instances of strong religious emotion, to the extent of arousing a certain feeling of romanticism. Nevertheless, it is increasingly associated with meditating on the key to success or failure in the following of Jesus. This, of course, concerns religious life.

The text of Luke 24 clearly reflects two moments of the story. The first part of the tale shows some disciples who are walking slowly, sad and disenchanted, who have lost hope, who abandon the following, and the community of the following, to return to their businesses... "We were hoping he'd be the liberator of Israel... but they have not seen him

". This is the end of an undertaking of following inspired by good will, generosity, seduction of them by the person of Jesus. These motivations are not capable of facing the final test, the crisis of the Cross, the human failure of Jesus... That is why they fall into abandonment and dispersion, and the pre-paschal following, or the following of the historic Jesus, comes to an end. The motivations of this following are too weak: they look for front places, they do not understand, they have little faith, they are filled with fear. The end result is abandonment, denial, dispersion, they do not overcome the crisis. This model of pre-paschal following is well-described in the Gospels.

The second part shows the disciples running toward Jerusalem, joyful and excited, recovering hope, returning to the community, resuming their following... This takes place after having encountered the Resurrected (the listening to the Word and the breaking of the bread). This faith now consolidates their following and enables them to face the scandal of the death of Jesus, as well as the scandal of their own death. This represents the post-paschal following, well-defined in the book of Acts. The disciples show the same human and moral weaknesses, but their following is now consolidated in an unbreakable faith, capable of filling their lives with meaning and of overcoming all the tests with joy, including their own martyrdom.

Good will and generosity are important starting points of the following in religious life. But they are not sufficient to guarantee determination and fidelity in the same following. These motivations often do not succeed in overcoming moments of crisis. When a crisis occurs, it leaves us submerged in the meaningless and tasteless which may lead to abandonment or, even worse, to remaining in religious life without finding any meaning or taste to it. The only thing that can guarantee our determination and fidelity in the following is radical faith. Faith is the only source of meaning and taste in religious life. It is an indispensable condition to ensure quality of life in religious life.

Many of your reports demand a search for meaning, sanctity, identity... religious life will have to "keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith" (Hb 12, 2). Faith is a gift, I know. But there are exercises that can be done to cultivate it, to sustain it and promote it. There are exercises today that can strengthen the faith as a source of meaning and motivation in our life and mission.

Firstly, it is necessary to practise silence, both external and internal. We live in an exaggeratedly noisy world. The streets and environment are filled with too much noise. Sometimes our own communities may be far too noisy. We need to rebuild an atmosphere of silence and concentration to cultivate our Dominican contemplation. But we also especially need to cultivate an internal silence. Our minds and affections are disturbed by too much interference. It is important to be informed about what happens in the world and, especially, about the problems that torment this humanity. Nevertheless, not all news is important nor is it necessary to listen to it several times a day. We should refrain from becoming addicted to the news, to all sorts of news. If we get trapped by all kinds of news about politics, sports, social life, ecclesiastic gossip, new software... we can end up in permanent superficiality and triviality. We must be silent if we are to go to the bottom of things, to distinguish the essential from the accidental, the necessary from the useless, and the absolute from the relative. This is the wisdom that is proper to the contemplative person. At this point, a sound meditation on the evangelical scene of Mary and Martha may acquire its full meaning.

Secondly, we must practise “inhabited” solitude in order to cultivate faith as a source of meaning. We must learn to live with ourselves, to enjoy one’s own being, identity, one’s own vocation and mission. Something is not working in religious life if we compulsively need to escape from our own selves, constantly escape like Cain. You can run from yourself wandering along the streets without a fixed destination, or along the great surfaces with no specific purpose, or surf the internet without looking for anything just for the sake of surfing or killing time, or search for any emergency exit which may save you from the challenge of facing yourself, naked and free of disguises. Whoever is not capable of living with his or her self will not be capable of living with others. The cultivation of inhabited solitude is a part of the Dominican contemplation.

Thirdly, we must exercise the praying and contemplative dimension of life. This is an essential trait of religious life and Dominican life. To affirm the need for a praying and contemplative dimension of life seems like an obvious statement that should not need to be underlined. But it is not out of place. Experience has shown that community praying is not sufficient to feed personal faith. We need to cultivate and practise at a personal level that praying and contemplative dimension of life.

Secularization has been, under many points of view, both beneficial and therapeutic. It is compatible with nearly everything, except with the abandonment of prayer and of the celebration of faith. This is one of the conclusions clearly imposed on our post-council liberal generation, perhaps after making some mistakes in that sense. If we run out of faith as a source of meaning, we will most likely remain in the dark, submerged in the meaningless, with a dead or routine faith, and, ultimately, a deaf malaise or sadness encrusted in our soul, not knowing exactly where it comes from.

To search for quality of life and personal satisfaction in religious life implies *focusing our life in the theological experience*, and cultivating that theological experience from the heart of reality, from the centre of daily life and not only from a religious feeling. To learn to be contemplative in action and from the mission: this is an essential trait of Dominican contemplation. To remain confident in the midst of everyday life, “ordinary” life, of anonymous tasks, when signs and consolations in religious life are scarce. In order to achieve quality of life we must grab onto life and live it as an exercise of confidence in the middle of the night, amidst so many crises and external and internal changes. Faith is the source of meaning that springs and flows even at night. *Quality of life postulates today a special exercise in the relation with God*: it is not about being more pitiful, rather *being more believing*. If fervour occurs, we will welcome it; but in these cold times, it may be risky to want to base the following of Jesus on fervour and feelings.

Prayer and contemplation: we have touched upon two fundamental pillars of religious and Dominican life.

4. Community and quality of life together.

We now go into another fundamental pillar of religious and Dominican life: community life. Many of your reports make reference to a need to refound the community, a need to give priority to community life.

At the community level, evangelical fidelity and quality of life, or the degree of personal satisfaction, depend on the quality of our life in common. Most of the malaise and dissatisfactions among members of religious life have to do with issues of living together. And, at the same time, the greater satisfactions among members of religious life have to do with a humanly sound and evangelically fraternal and sororal common life. The level of personal satisfaction of members goes hand in hand with the degree of health of the community and the quality of their life together.

Your reports often denounce individualism and isolation as one of the great temptations in religious communities today. It is true that individualism is not necessarily a sin, rather a cultural trait or a sign of our times. We turn to it as an emergency exit for problems of community life and to compensate or comfort ourselves for community weaknesses. However, the results of individualism are not positive with respect to quality of life and personal satisfaction. Individualism is usually very gratifying in its beginnings and very bitter at the end since it usually leads to an empty and bitter loneliness (members of religious and Dominican life increasingly state that "they feel very lonely").

There is no mystery to this. This only reflects an elementary postulate of anthropology: the fundamental success in the life of people consists in the success in love and personal communication. Personal communication consists in the mutual acknowledgement of people's dignity, in taking into consideration and being taken into consideration, in the mutual rendering of solidarity support, in the exchange of experiences. In other environments there may be other rules to measure the degree of success or failure in human life; however, primary groups believe there is no greater failure in the life of a person than having the feeling of not loving anyone or not being loved by anyone. This is a feeling of absolute solitude, a stage at which all sources of meaning and all sources of authentic personal satisfaction are shut down.

We are experiencing a paradox in this area: never has humanity enjoyed so many means of communication and perhaps, never has it experienced so much loneliness; never so interconnected and never so incommunicable; never so surrounded with contacts and never so alone. Can this also be true for religious life? What is the computer's role today in religious life, in the life of communities, in that of religious people? Today we often state that the most common disease in our welfare society is loneliness, vacant solitude, loneliness as emptiness in oneself, emptiness of God and of everything. This type of solitude is a very close sister of hopelessness and depression. Is this solitude calling at the doors of our communities or is it already installed in them?

During the post-council period, many efforts were made to rebuild the community web. We often turned to life sciences, psychology, pedagogy, management of human resources, conflict mediators. Undoubtedly, contributions from these sources were very positive and beneficial. But we clearly saw that life sciences are not sufficient to support the community web in religious communities. We need to set theological bases in our community life, in our living in common.

During this post-council phase, we freed ourselves from the rigid community structures, the rigid regular discipline, which characterized that model of traditional communities. However, perhaps we have not managed to, or been able to, replace a rigid community discipline with an evangelical community mysticism. Therefore, we have come across a certain weakening of community life, sometimes accompanied by a deterioration in the quality of life.

In order to rebuild the community web in religious and Dominican life and in order to guarantee the quality of our community life, we need to recover the theological foundations of our life in common and to establish a number of community exercises. Today, we indicate the following, among others:

First, we must create an awareness of the common vocation. All the sisters and brothers have been called by the Lord. Consequently, they are in the community with full rights to share this life. Despite the deficiencies and differences of all sorts (character, culture, ideology, politics...) they have the same right as I do to live in the community. They deserve welcome, respect and consideration. "We must accept the sisters not because they are perfect but because they are sisters and because we need them".

Secondly, it is necessary to create an awareness of our common faith in Christ Jesus. In order to live together in a religious community in a healthy manner we do not need to share the same theology but we must be able to profess together the faith expressed in the Credo. But it would also be necessary to share the experiences of faith. For this, we don't need to spend all day talking about God, about pitiful things or pronouncing ejaculatory prayers. But it is necessary for us to be capable of talking, from the perspective of faith, about problems as serious as suffering, injustice, the poor, war, the excluded, terrorism, all sorts of scandals. What topics do conversations in religious communities deal with today? (A couple of years ago, in Madrid, a major superior reported the following topics: politics, sport, issues connected with the computer and its programs...).

Thirdly, the common celebration of faith. A human group that does not celebrate, dies. That is why it is so important for families to observe specific dates such as periodic meetings, established celebrations, some symbols of social cohesion. The same thing applies to religious communities. If the common celebration of faith is missing, soon the religious community will become a home for celibate people, and nothing more. Forgetting or abandoning the community liturgy will necessarily bring along a weakening in the community. One of the motivations of many candidates who today approach religious life is precisely the search for an environment of faith, of prayer, of celebration... suitable to cultivate the religious experience.

Fourth, the common search for truth. Your reports have listed studies as one of the pillars of Dominican life. The search for truth is part of the contemplative dimension of our life. It is an important aspect of community life. It should not be missing from any Dominican community. Truth is first of all an evangelical matter, not an academic issue: we aim to live and to make truth. Without these ideals there can be no quality of life nor of cohabitation. Quality of life is compatible with mistakes, with ignorance, but it is not compatible with lying, which is an intentional concealing of truth. Falsehood is the woodworm of life in common. Community studies, community reflection, the community search for the truth, are elements needed to cultivate the quality of life in Dominican communities. Do we fear the truth? Many of your reports ask for a greater commitment toward the initial formation and ongoing formation of sisters.

Fifth, the practice of fraternal correction and the communal practice of reconciliation. This is one of the important subjects in religious life today. It is about a theology for the cohabitation in the Christian and religious community. The absence of this practice of reconciliation at community level has contributed to the deterioration of community life:

the problems are not treated in public and they create a tense and oppressive communal environment which prevents a healthy life and a gratifying communal life together. We must recover our frank speaking in order to heal the atmosphere and remove criticism and gossiping. A lack of reconciliation causes an accumulation of irreconcilable situations. Human beings constantly need forgiveness and reconciliation if they are not be crushed by guilt. The absence of periodic reconciliation will cause problems to become stuck and consciences to be cauterized. In the communal practice of reconciliation, the community is the one that helps us discern our own life and provides us with a suitable environment to ask for forgiveness, to receive it and grant it. Each community should find enough courage and imagination to restore this practice.

As to the rest, it is necessary to diligently take care of community life since it is the element that mostly affects the quality of life of brothers and sisters. Today, the quality of life is at a low level in a number of communities. This is not due to major conflicts, but to an atmosphere of non-communication, growing individualism, progressive indifference with regard to community matters, a weakening of fraternity and sorority. But the attack on the community is an attack on us. That is why, even if it were not mandated, love would still be our most indispensable element. Life sciences help us to improve our ability to live in common, but the real pillars of community in religious life are theological pillars: common faith and ongoing reconciliation. We cannot consider as evangelical common life that which is limited to a peaceful coexistence or to non-aggression pacts; these are strategies that occur far too frequently at the present time in religious communities.

In order to care diligently for life in the Dominican community, we must take into consideration some human aspects, some profoundly human aspects, which contribute greatly to improving the quality of community life: politeness, personal communication, democratic attitudes, the capacity to speak and enter into dialogue about problems openly, feast and celebration, the communication of assets and cooperation of all in community services. And today, in a very special manner, assistance for the ill, aged and people in difficulty who become more numerous everyday in most religious Congregations.

As to the rest, the Assembly should discern the model of Dominican community required by the new times and the new mission. There is abundant material in your responses to the questionnaire regarding this topic: they ask for smaller and more flexible communities, a more horizontal and shared leadership, a greater collegiality, poorer and simpler communities, a greater mobility of people, greater collaboration with the laity and Dominican volunteers...

5. Mission and quality of life.

We now get into the fourth pillar of Dominican life: the mission. Dominican life cannot be conceived without a mission. Saint Dominic organized the entire foundation Project around the evangelizing mission. All elements of Dominican life are based on evangelization: prayer and liturgy, contemplation and studies, formation, community. That is why the evangelical fidelity to our baptism and to our profession in the Dominican family is at stake in our mission.

When we speak of the mission we almost always understand it as an obligation, and we are especially concerned about the success or the effectiveness of the mission. These are legitimate concerns, but they are not the only ones. Today, religious life and Dominican life are making an effort to look at the mission from a different perspective, from the perspective of personal satisfaction. Why don't we also look at it as an essential factor for a quality of life at the personal level? Why don't we also look at it as something that must be enjoyed and as a source of personal satisfaction?

A life with a mission has meaning, it is filled with meaning. A life with an accomplished mission represents an enormous satisfaction. As life goes by and we look back on it, we ascertain how painful times with no mission can be, and what great satisfaction is felt during the periods of life that are generously dedicated to the mission, to serving this humanity. One of my most powerful pastoral experiences was precisely the assistance to terminally ill patients, also in infirmaries of religious communities. I have heard brothers and sisters at the end of life, in the face of death where there is no room for deceit and lies, saying with an enviable serenity: "Father, mission accomplished, I am ready whenever God is". It must be extraordinary to finish our days like this, with a feeling of having accomplished our mission.

A life with no mission is a life with no meaning, an empty and failed life. A life with no mission accomplished or with an erroneous mission can cause much frustration and anguish, especially in the end, at the time of the truth. At that time, I have also heard some people say things such as: "Father, I have made mistakes in life, I have let it slip away, I have wasted time. May the Lord forgive me". Of course God forgives us, but who will fill that gap that the lack of mission has left inside of us? As years go by and we look back, the empty days, months, years are painful and they hurt with no solution, or rather hurt with the only solution being forgiveness.

The mission in Dominican life has some special characteristics that are worth considering.

Firstly, the mission may be motivated by the need to make a living and cover one's own and other people's material needs. This is not a sin, even if it is not the most evangelical motivation. Nevertheless, how we wish we were all conscious in religious life of the obligation of each human being of the right age and condition to work to earn his daily bread through work. This dignifies the person and makes him or her aware of his or her dignity.

However, the mission in Dominican life must especially be motivated by apostolic zeal, by compassion, by the desire to do something for humanity. We must go beyond the merely financial criteria in the planning and discernment of apostolic ministries. Since in religious life financial responsibilities are usually institutional in nature – the institution backs us – in the absence of apostolic zeal, we can anticipate that some members of the community may prematurely go on to a voluntary unemployment thereby totally neglecting the mission. Major Superiors have already expressed during their meetings the concern about the misuse of retirement by some members of religious life. Retirement from work is one thing; the abandonment of the evangelizing mission is something very different. Can a retired person not pray, study, celebrate, preach, teach catechesis, accompany a group in biblical studies?

Secondly, the mission is our source of spiritual fertility. To abandon it means to end in sterility. Since in religious life responsibilities are originally communal or institutional – the congregation, the General, the Province, the Prioress, are in charge – this has brought about a system which does not favour personal responsibilities. If individuals are not adults, mature and responsible, if they lack a personal mysticism, they may give in to comfort and personal irresponsibility. This system of life surrounds us with certainties and guarantees from all sides. Therefore, we must be attentive and not fall into the risk of what has been called “celibacy in claustration” or lack of involvement in the mission to avoid complications, problems, efforts, tiredness, and especially the price of suffering carried by Dominican compassion, the passion for the world and for humanity. Here is where our self-fulfilment or personal fulfilment is really at stake, an ideal that was greatly cuddled by the post-council religious generation. Some of these risks are reported in several of your reports.

Thirdly, the central theory today in the theology of religious life is that the basic mission of religious life is to give testimony of an evangelical life or through an evangelical life. All religious people are competent in this, young and older, healthy or ill, brothers and sisters both in working age and retired. In this sense, the moral and evangelical behaviour of individuals in a community is not a matter of freedom or personal option. We cannot happily say: “I am free and I can do as I please”, even though this sounds great in our Dominican liberal democracy. The testimony of life is an obligation that stems from our profession in the Dominican family or simply by the fact of living in an apostolic community. Nobody has the right to discredit the ministry of the brothers or sisters, the ministry of the community. From this standpoint, we can understand Saint Paul: “so as to not discredit the ministry”. We should recall that one of the reasons why Saint Dominic considered the community as a pillar of Dominican life was precisely because the testimony of an evangelical life is the best and most effective preaching of the Gospel.

To say that the essential mission of religious life is to give a testimony of evangelical life does not mean that the members of Dominican communities must be morally perfect. Evangelical life is compatible with human weakness or fragility. It is not compatible with sustained systematic inconsistency and even less with cynicism and the cultivation of appearances. Perhaps, the most profound testimony that religious life can contribute to the world is the testimony of faith, of hope and of love (translated, of course, into fight for justice, for human rights, in solidarity with the poor and the victims). Paul takes the poor as a criterion to discern the true Gospel: “Only, we were to be mindful of the poor” (Gal 2, 10).

Fourthly, it is necessary to affirm that the mission, even though it may be arduous and painful, can contribute and must contribute to the quality of life of Dominicans, to their personal satisfaction. The mission is not only an obligation or a heavy load; it is an excellent opportunity for personal fulfilment and living a full life. That is why we can learn to enjoy the mission.

While I was a student I heard a Dominican professor say the following: “I only preach when the Prior orders me to do so”. At the time, this shocked me somewhat. I could not understand how a member of the Order of Preachers would say that. What would Humbert of Romans have said about this religious man, given his high esteem for the ministry of preaching? Today, I would have been much more outraged. After many years in the Order, my conclusion is that preaching, the mission for that Dominican, was simply a load, a weight, a penance, an imposed obligation...

Well then, I believe that in order for the mission to be a part of our quality of life, for it to provide personal satisfaction, despite the tiredness, the possible rejection, the frustration it sometimes carries, we must learn to enjoy it. The satisfaction of the accomplished task is not sufficient; it is right and necessary to learn to enjoy the mission.

We must learn to enjoy the mission through relationships, that is, personal relationships: to see children growing and maturing in a learning centre; to see the faithful grow in their Christianity and discover new faces of God and new evangelical experiences in a parish community; to see that a person finds meaning of life through our words or our simple presence; to see a couple rebuilding a relationship thanks to our accompaniment... this is learning to enjoy the mission. It may require that we re-educate ourselves as to affectivity and celibacy, and not turn them into a defensive wall when faced with any human affection in order to protect ourselves from suffering. This is what we previously referred to as "celibacy in claustration".

And we must learn to enjoy the mission in long commitments as well, that is, those jobs carried out without security, when we do not even know who will benefit from them, for which no one will thank us, but there they are. For instance, the fight for Justice and Peace, for the human rights of marginalized or discriminated majorities or minorities, for an international amnesty against arms and war, for ecology, and even the exercise of government in religious life or writing a book that no one will probably purchase or read, etc... These endeavours can only be enjoyed from a purely gratuitous experience.

Your responses to the questionnaire and your reports provide abundant material for the Assembly to process the issue of the mission. Many sisters see the following as areas of mission and ministry: testimony of life, interpersonal encounters and dialogue, liturgy celebrations and the *lectio divina*, evangelization through new technologies, the presence in an area of poverty and exclusion, the ministry of preaching in its various forms. They consider as fundamental challenges today: the presence in poor and marginalized environments, migration, the woman, the family, education, and the search for meaning in the secular welfare society, intercultural and religious dialogue, and, of course, the challenges of justice and peace, human rights, ecology...

In Dominican life, the testimony of life is the first announcement of the Gospel. That is why even the cloistered convents were called "preaching houses". But the Dominican charism forces us to place the ministry of preaching or of evangelization at the centre of our mission. Other Orders or Congregations may have other ministries as priorities. Our priority is the ministry of evangelization or of preaching in its many facets: interpersonal dialogue, catechesis, teaching, writings, retreats, *lectio divina*, liturgical preaching... (Fortunately, two important phenomena are occurring with respect to the ministry of preaching: firstly, the conviction that the homily is not the only way to preach. Secondly, the conviction that all baptised people are ministers of the Word).



Thanks to a mission we have enjoyed and in which we felt fulfilled we'll be able to say at the end of our days: "Lord, our life on earth was not useless".