

## Three meditations for Paris

« Figures dominicaines de sainteté »

### St Dominic

Today we are meditating on three very different sorts of saints, Dominic, Thomas and Catherine. Each represents a way of being holy. Is this strange? One might imagine that becoming holy would make us similar and not different. The more we are like Christ, surely the more we are like each other. The opening words of *Anna Karenia* by Tolstoy are: 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.'

I would wish to say the opposite. The happier we are the more different we are, because we are happy in being ourselves. When we are unhappy, then we are also least ourselves, because God made us for happiness.

I do not wish to say that unhappy people are unholy. Not at all. Even the saints pass through times of sorrow. But be holy is to be the person whom God created me to be. A famous Hassidic Rabbi called Zusia said: 'When I shall face the celestial tribunal, I shall not be asked why I was not Abraham, Jacob or Moses. I shall be asked why I was not Zusia.'<sup>1</sup> If someone is not holy then maybe it is because he pretends that he is Dominic or Thomas or Catherine, instead of being himself as God intended.

And I am frequently struck by how very different from each other are Dominican saints. Think of Fra Angelico, Martin de Porres, Albert the Great, Rose of Lima. They are all entirely different: a mystic, an intellectual, an artist, a cook. How is it possible that they all belonged to the same Order? But perhaps the genius of St Dominic was precisely to found an Order which lets us be different. It offers a way to holiness because it helps each of us to be holy in the way that God intends for each of us. There is no 'Dominican spirituality' which is imposed. St. Catherine talks of Dominic's "a very spacious, gladsome and fragrant, a most delightful garden"<sup>2</sup>, in which there is a space for everyone. She talked of Dominic's ship in which the perfect and the not so perfect could sail together.

This is reflected in our form of government. Dominic wishes every brother to have a voice in Chapter because the Holy Spirit gave each of us something different to say. A brother may say something stupid, ignorant or mistaken, but there is still a grain of truth in his words that I must welcome, because he has received the Holy Spirit in his unique humanity.

Dominic gave space for the brethren. At the first General Chapter in 1220, he wished to resign as the Superior. That was refused. And so he appointed diffinitors to run the Chapter and have full authority in its decision making. Most Orders endure deep crisis when their founders die. We did not because Dominic gave us space from the beginning. When I was Master of the Order, a Cardinal, who was a friend, came to see me and he said, 'Now,

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<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel *Souls on Fire* New York 1972 p.120

<sup>2</sup> D 158

Timothy you understand that it is lonely at the top.’ And I had to reply, ‘Not in the Dominicans, because one cannot be more than just one of the brethren.’

An Order in which we can each be ourselves: That sounds very easy and comfortable. But it is not, as Dominic knew. First of all you have to go to the other as they are. St Dominic always did this, even physically. He left Spain and founded the Order in France. When our Spanish brothers are proud of Dominic being Spanish, I enjoy reminding them that he got out of Spain as quickly as possible. But he did not even stay in the home he had made in Toulouse, but left that to go to Rome. He wished to go to the Cumans, but never had to the time.

More profoundly, he went to people as they are. You remember that one day he was travelling to Paris with Brother Bertrand and he met some Germans. He was frustrated that because he could not speak German, then he was unable to preach to them. He said, ‘Let us pray that we may understand them so that we may share the good news with them’. It is interesting that Dominic does not pray that the Germans may understand him, but that he may understand them. When he preached to the Cathars, he adopted a way of life as close to theirs as possible. He was ascetic like them, and accepted their hospitality.

And it is also very demanding to be loved as one is. It is much easier to be loved because of what one has done, because one is intelligent or good looking or has the correct opinions. It is easier to be loved because of the mask one has presented to the world. It is easier to feel that one has merited love. But if someone loves you as you are, then you have to be yourself.

Saints like Dominic and Padre Pio have this unsettling ability to see through the facade to the real person. Dominic wept for sinners at night, because he knew that they were sinners, and loved them as they were. It is frightening if I present myself as St Thomas or James Bond, and someone says to me, ‘But it is Timothy whom I love.’ My facade is destroyed, and I am naked before the other. Do we always have the courage to love each other as we are? Or do we do what is much easier, and love people as they present themselves? Do we play along with their games? Dominic invites us to a more wonderful and truthful love.

### **St Thomas**

It is difficult to imagine two more different people than St Dominic and St Thomas. Dominic was a preacher who left hardly any written texts. Thomas was a man who loved to study and he left libraries of books. Dominic engaged with people as he met them on the road, and Thomas left behind a vast and beautiful theological vision. And this illustrates Dominic’s genius. He founded an Order which would give a central place to someone so different from himself as Thomas. Some people regard Thomas as also a founder of the Order. And Dominic would not have been jealous.

But they both had a passion for the truth which is to be sought in debate. For Dominic it was debate with the publican all night long, and with the Cathars in the market place, and for

Thomas it was the *disputatio* in the University. Both believed that our human dignity and happiness is founded on our capacity to seek for the truth and ultimately to encounter it in the face of God.

It is said that when St Thomas was a child he used to always ask people: ‘What is God?’ And it was the question that fascinated him all his life. All his life he sought to understand what is God? And he never discovered the answer. He wrote that in this life we are joined to God as to the unknown. But at the end of his life he was granted a small glimpse of what he had been seeking. He seems to have had some sort of mystical experience, and he said that all that he had written was as mere straw compared with what he had seen.

Herbert McCabe has argued that this was the sanctity of Thomas, a sanctity of the mind. ‘As Jesus saw that to refuse the defeat of the cross would be to betray his whole mission, all that he was sent to do, so Thomas knew that to refuse to accept defeat about this one question would be to betray all that he had to do, his mission.’<sup>1</sup> It is only in the beatific vision, when we are so united with God that God becomes ‘the form of the intellect’, that we shall God as he is, sharing in God’s self-knowledge and utter happiness.

You might therefore conclude that Thomas wasted his life. He devoted it all to something that could not be achieved. This is wrong for two reasons. First, because all of his intellectual striving was the preparation for his reception of the gift. All that effort of reasoning was the opening of his mind to receive the gift when it came. His life was a deeply ascetical one, letting go of false images of God, destroying the idols of his mind, so as to be ready for God’s self gift when the moment was ripe. All thinkers and poets know that the hard work is not the writing. It is opening oneself to the gift of insight. Czeslaw Milosz said, ‘I felt very strongly that nothing depended on my will, that everything I might accomplish in life would not be won by my own efforts but given as a gift.’ And the English poet D. H. Lawrence said: ‘Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me.’

Secondly, Thomas is for us a sign that our human happiness is the contemplation of God face to face. Nothing else can ultimately satisfy us. That is our dignity. God became human so that we might become divine and know God. As Pope Leo the Great said in the fourth century, ‘Christian, remember you dignity. For you now share God’s own nature.’

The roots of our present financial and social crisis lie, perhaps, in that loss of a sense of our ultimate vocation. We have forgotten where lies our happiness. Charles Taylor argues that in the seventeenth century, that hope of profound transformation began to dim. People believed in God, of course, but hoped for no more than a merely human flourishing. Eternity was the endless prolongation of a domestic joy, with angels replacing the servants. One does not have to pay them and they are much less trouble. We forgot the promise of divinization.

This prepared the way for an even more shrunken understanding of our humanity, *homo oeconomicus*. We are believed to driven by nothing more than greed and self-interest. John Stuart Mills described a human being as one ‘who inevitably does that by which he may obtain the greatest amount of necessaries, conveniences, and luxuries, with the smallest

quantity of labour and physical self-denial with which they can be obtained.” It is this pusillanimous view of humanity that has led us to this point where the future seems so grim. “Greed is good, greed is right”, cried the hero of the 1987 film, *Wall Street*. It is this affirmation of greed that has led to the plundering of our fragile little planet to the point of exhaustion and an economic system that devours the weak. We cannot begin to regain some purchase on the future without some renewed sense of the dignity which is ours as those who are made to see God face to face and become like Him.

St Thomas, spending his hours in his study thinking and writing reminds us of our ultimate happiness, which is the truth of God. We may follow other paths, like Dominic and Catherine. But the end of the journey is the same.

### **St Catherine**

Each form of sanctity has its own way of life. Dominic was an itinerant preacher. St Thomas asked questions. And St Catherine of Siena conversed with God. Her famous work is her Dialogues.

The holiness of each of these saints was founded on friendship. Friendship with God overflows into friendship with God’s other friends. It was said of St Dominic that he was loved by all since he loved all. St Thomas was the great theologian of friendship. At the heart of God’s life was the friendship of the Trinity in which we are destined to find our homes. Did St Thomas have friends? He was clearly a man who loved nothing better than to be with his books. When he had dinner with the King of France, he dropped out of the conversation and ignored the King! But he clearly was close to Reginald, his faithful Socius, and we know that he had a friend called Annibaldo delgi Annibaldi<sup>3</sup>. And he talks so well of our sensitivity to our friends, that he must have experienced friendship. Part of his friendship was seeking the truth with his brethren, answering their questions, even the silly questions of the Master of the Order.

One remarkable thing about these early Dominican saints is the easy friendship of men and women. Dominic’s first community was for women, at Prouilhe. When he was dying he confessed to preferring to talk to young women rather than being talked at by old women<sup>4</sup>! There is the beautiful friendship between Jordan of Saxony and Diana, and between Catherine and Raymond of Capua. Thomas said that grace perfects nature, and God’s grace blesses these natural friendships with people of the opposite sex.

The core of Catherine’s life was her intimate friendship with God. She described God as the bed in which she could rest, or the pacific sea in which she could swim. And she rested in the friendship of her friends. One has the impression of a community of lively young people who gathered to enjoy each other’s company and to talk of God. She believed that their mutual friendship was an opportunity “to bring each other to birth in the gentle presence of God”<sup>5</sup>,

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<sup>3</sup> Tugwell *Albert and Thomas* p.262

<sup>4</sup> Tugwell 92

<sup>5</sup> L 292

But they had a sense of humour. They were called the *caterini*, Catherine's people. And they called her *mamma*. They gave each other silly nicknames, such as Giovanna pazza, Giovanna the crazy, and stolta Cecca, stupid Cecca. Friendship ought, of its nature, to be open. I should share my friends with my friends. One of the joys in religious life is to meet and love the brethren's friends.

Catherine's holiness, then, is founded on intimate friendship. And I would suggest two qualities of friendship upon which we should meditate: fidelity and open speech. We should be faithful to our friends because Jesus has called us friends and is faithful to us. One of the advantages of growing older is that we have old friends, people who have been our friends for decades. They may become boring and repeat the same stories all the time. New young friends may be more stimulating, but any friendship calls for fidelity. There may be moments of rupture, when one grows apart, but that must be healed. One cannot give up on a friendship, because God is a faithful friend to me, regardless of what I do. I grew apart from an old friend, a painter, after he committed the terrible sin of admiring Mrs Thatcher. But now our friendship is restored! Never let a friendship die. It is because of one's confidence that friendship endures that we can rest in it, a tiny share in our resting in God.

The other extraordinary quality of Catherine's friendship was her open speech. She told her friends lovingly exactly what she thought, and no doubt expected them to do the same thing to her. This is the bold speech of the apostles in Acts, their *parrhesia* (Acts 4.31). She spoke boldly to everyone.

If the Church is to be a sacrament of God's friendship, then we must dare to talk boldly. Often in the Church today we keep silent. We are afraid to say what we really think. Maybe we do not want to scandalize people or get into trouble. But Catherine was not afraid. She wrote to some cardinals: "Be silent no longer. Cry out with a hundred thousand voices. I see that the world is destroyed through silence. Christ's spouse is pallid, her colour has been drained from her."<sup>6</sup> She was afraid of no one. When she spoke to the Pope in Avignon she said, 'The honour of Almighty God compels me to speak bluntly. The truth is, that even before I left my native city, I was more conscious of the evil odour of the sins committed in the Roman Curia than were the persons who commit them daily.' Raymond says that when she said this, the Pope was silent and he himself was stunned!

My prayer to Catherine is that she will give us the strength to make the Church a place of Christ's friendship. We are Christ's friends and should be friends of each other. We should be able to rest in friendship of the community. This demands that we must enjoy each other's company; we must be faithful. And we must dare to speak the truth and to hear it.

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<sup>6</sup> L 16

