

# Drinking in the Word

## Dominicans and the New Wine of the Gospel

Prague – Meeting of the Dominican Nuns – 06/09/05

fr. Paul Murray, O.P.

---

**S**peaking about wine, on one occasion, Blessed Humbert of Romans remarked, "there are wines so weak that they cannot intoxicate." But Humbert then went on at once to declare, "the Word of God is like a strong wine and it does intoxicate." Intoxication ! – what a powerful image to describe the profound effect on us of listening to the Word of God ! Humbert, in order to underline his point further, quotes Jeremiah : "I became like a man who is drunk, like someone sodden with wine, from my encounter with the words of God" (Jer 23:9).



Drinking wine or drinking alcohol is an image or a metaphor which recurs again and again in the writings of the early Dominicans and in the stories they liked to tell about themselves. The image is one, of course, which has often been used by Christians and non-Christians over the centuries in order to evoke aspects of their religious life and experience. But Dominicans seem to have taken to this image or metaphor with a distinctive enthusiasm, and to have used it in a great variety of ways. Thus, in their writings, the image of drinking or of being made drunk, describes not only the overwhelming impact the Word of God has had on their interior lives, but also the effect of that encounter on almost every other aspect of their lives as Dominicans.

My proposal in this paper, therefore, is to examine some of the many different ways in which the image of drinking or drunkenness was taken up and used by Dominican men and women during the first two centuries of the Order's life. To this end I have divided the paper into three sections : first, Dominicans and the Wine of Gospel Joy; second, St Thomas Aquinas and "the wine of wisdom"; and third, Dominican Men and Women "drunk on love."

### 1. Dominicans and the Wine of Gospel Joy

More perhaps than any of the early Dominicans Jordan of Saxony was fond of the image of drinking. We find it recurring, for example, in a number of his sermons which have survived. On one occasion, preaching with characteristic vigour, Jordan speaks of "the strength of wine" which, he notes, "gives a person a lift" because "wine brings delight and puts a man at his ease." This idea is repeated in another sermon where, after a brief, memorable reference to "the wine of hope" we hear once again of "[the] good wine which," according to the preacher, "puts a man at his ease, gives him a lift, and stops him feeling his sorrows."

Just over fifty of Jordan's letters have survived, and the word "joy" occurs on almost every page. Most of these letters were sent by Jordan to his beloved Dominican friend, the enclosed contemplative, Diana d'Andalo . In one letter, addressed not to Diana only but to her entire community at Bologna, Jordan quotes a phrase from Matthew's Gospel about joy : "Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Mt 25:21). The meaning of the phrase is clear enough. But Jordan, in a moment of sheer Dominican bravado and enthusiasm, decides – for the space of a paragraph – to change or to extend its meaning. For him "the joy of the Lord" has somehow become one thing with the happiness of belonging to the Order of Preachers. And so he says "Enter into the joy of your Lord" meaning by "Lord" that form of the grace of the Lord which is the Order itself. Enter into it, Jordan says, into that life of obedient communion, and "all your sorrow shall be turned into joy, and your joy no one can take from you" !

Unfortunately none of the letters of Diana have survived. But, on the subject of joy, there is one remarkable text composed by the enclosed Dominican contemplative, Margaret Ebner, in which we are told the story of a Dominican nun in her community who, although she was within days of death, had clearly already entered into the joy of her Lord. Margaret writes : "At this time one of our sisters lay dying. She had served God earnestly in suffering and poverty. And since she had already lain four days without eating I went to her and told her I noticed that she wanted to go to God before me." That last, unexpected statement must surely have been accompanied by a look or smile of irony. Our saint, the Blessed Margaret, obviously possessed a somewhat dry sense of humour ! But how, we might ask, did the dying nun respond ?

Then she [the dying nun] clapped her hands together for joy and laughed so that it was heard everywhere in the room. One of the sisters said to her, "You are acting like someone who has just come from a wedding." Then I replied, "You act like someone who wants to go to a wedding." Then she laughed so loudly that I noticed that God had granted her special grace. She assured me that this was true, and at that I laughed like her and was so happy that I could not sleep that night because of the joy in my heart over the eternal joy for which she longed.

Of course, as all of you here know very well – and much better than me ! – the contemplative life is not all bliss. Blessed Diana in particular, it is clear from Jordan's letters, was often undergoing very severe trials. And Jordan, writing to try to console her, states in one of his letters that a time will come when she will be rewarded by Christ for her faithfulness, "when no tribulation shall any longer come to you, but together we shall drink of the pure and unmixed chalice of everlasting joy." (Note, once again, the instinctive use here of the image of drinking.) Jordan, returns to this theme in another letter remarkable for its comforting vision and great tenderness. In contrast to the inevitable suffering we undergo in this world Jordan speaks of the great joy awaiting us in heaven. And, in order to describe this joy, he makes use, over and over again, of the image of wine, repeating as it happens some of the words and phrases used in one of the homilies referred to above. There, reference was made not only to the "wine of hope" but also to "the wine of joy" and to "the wine which makes man's heart glad." In the end, the preacher says, when all fear is gone and hope finds its fulfilment, then "we will drink that new wine which no earthly vessel can contain." In his letter to Diana, Jordan strikes again the note of encouragement and joy but, this time, with an even more vivid, more moving eloquence. At "the wedding-feast of the Lamb," he writes, [the Lamb] will give sweet wine to those whose soul is suffering bitterness through thirst of love; he will wipe up the water of this sad and savourless life and replace it by the holy and fruitful wine, that noble wine, the wine which makes man's heart glad, that wine with whose sweetness the beloved of God are inebriated, I mean the wine of everlasting joy : the rare wine, the new wine which the Son of God, blessed for ever, pours out for his elect at the table of the court of heaven.

Since none of the letters of Diana have survived we can only guess at the impact which a letter, like the one just quoted, made on the recipient. But we do know, from Jordan himself, the effect another letter had on a woman living in Cologne. It was sent, not by Jordan, but by Jordan's great friend, Henry of Cologne. Henry, in his letter, had recommended, apparently that this person "recline on the breast of Jesus," and there "quench the thirst" of her soul. "These words inflamed her," Jordan informs us, and she experienced such ecstasy, that "she became quite drunk with the enormous flow of well-being which she felt." It was some time, Jordan then goes on to say, before "the intoxicating spiritual sweetness left her."

According to this account by Jordan the focus of attention is on our human thirst for God. But, in a homily which he preached in England in 1229, Jordan changes the focus of attention to God's thirst for us. And the statement he makes is as profound as it is surprising. Jordan starts off, characteristically, speaking in a very down-to-earth, colloquial manner : "Nowadays people say, 'I think it would be great if you could come to me and have a drink with me.' And it's just like that with the Lord. For he says to the soul : 'Give me something to drink.' O if only you knew the love of God which is saying to you, 'I thirst' !"

Unfortunately we don't possess in manuscript form any of the sermons delivered by St Dominic himself, but one early witness, Brother Stephen, says of Dominic that "he had never heard anyone whose words moved the brethren so much to compunction and weeping." And Dominic himself we know often wept – and not only when he was preaching but also during Mass at the moment just before the consecration of the wine. According to Brother John who often assisted Dominic at Mass, "tears were often flowing from his eyes when he turned to take the wine...after receiving the Lord's Body." Here the two central realities in Dominic's life are clearly manifest : the wine of Christ's blood which he drank, and the wine of Christ's Word which he preached.

Other Dominicans of the first and second generations were also noted for the passion of their preaching. As a direct result, for example, of hearing Blessed Reginald of Orléans preach in Paris, Jordan of Saxony joined the Order. In his *Libellus* Jordan says of Reginald : "His fervent eloquence fired the hearts of all who heard it as if it had been a blazing torch; hardly anyone was rocklike enough to be proof against its heat. The whole of Bologna was in ferment." This kind of intense emotional fervour was clearly not uncommon among the very early friars. But when later Dominicans, such as Humbert of Romans, came to write about preaching and other aspects of the Gospel, they tended to write in a much more dispassionate and intellectual manner. This tendency found its most notable expression in the work of St Thomas who was, in fact, writing when Humbert was master.

In subsequent centuries, we have come to identify the Dominican approach, at its ordinary best, with the grace of a serene, intellectual objectivity. But, it should be noted, that a distinctly passionate fervour in preaching was at least as much a characteristic of the early Dominicans. Among the most famous of all the early preachers in the Order was Jordan of Saxony himself. According to the ancient account, he "overflowed with enthusiastic talk, brilliant with apt and powerful illustrations." And he quite consciously worked at getting his hearers "drunk" on the Word. Once, when he was preaching at Padua, someone asked him why he had such manifest success with the Arts students, the students of Aristotle, but seemed to make little impact on the theologians and canonists. Jordan replied, speaking with characteristic verve and good humour :

Arts men drink the plain water of Aristotle and the other philosophers all week. So when they are offered the words of Christ or his disciples in a Sunday sermon or on a feastday, they fall victim at once to the intoxication of the Holy Spirit's wine, and hand over to God not only their goods but themselves. But these theologians are always listening to the words of God, and they go the same way as a country sacristan who passes the altar so often that he loses his reverence for it and frequently turns his back on it, while outsiders bow reverently towards it.

As a direct result of listening to Jordan, an amazing number of young men joined the Dominican Order. They had obviously become intoxicated with "the Spirit's wine." But Jordan's unique genius or "tactic" with respect to vocations, was not always matched by the recruitment practice of some of the brethren. One report indicates that actual alcohol may have been employed, on one occasion, to "encourage" a particular individual to join the Order ! The source for this account is a letter sent by Pope Innocent IV in 1244. There was, at that time, apparently, at least the suspicion, that a number of friars actually got a schoolmaster from Asti drunk, and then forced a habit on him – not, obviously, the kind of spiritual intoxication Jordan of Saxony had in mind !

One story about actual wine-drinking which involves St Dominic himself, is recorded in the *Miracula* composed by Blessed Cecilia. Apparently, Dominic arrived late one night with some of his brethren to visit a particular convent of the sisters. The nuns had already retired to bed. But when the bell was rung – the known signal for the preacher's arrival – they all got up from their beds at once and came down to the Church. There Dominic delivered what is described by Blessed Cecilia as a "long conference." The text, however, adds that it "brought them great consolation." And then, the text continues :

When he had finished speaking, he said, "It would be good, my daughters, to have something to drink." He called brother Roger, the cellarer, to bring some wine and a cup...Then he blessed it and

drank from it himself...After the brethren had all had a drink, St Dominic said : "I want all my daughters to have a drink"...Then all the sisters drank from it...and they all drank as much as they wanted, encouraged by St Dominic, who kept on saying, "Drink up, my daughters !" At that time there were 104 sisters there, and they all drank as much wine as they wanted.

Blessed Cecilia has also handed down to us another story concerning Dominic in which a great burst of laughter is recorded. What provoked the laughter was an unusual miracle he worked in the Church of St Sixtus. According to the ancient account, Dominic, with unrestrained enthusiasm, unmasked the Evil One who had come flying into the Church disguised as a bird in order to prevent him preaching. All the Dominicans who were present, both the brethren and the sisters, at once burst out laughing (*subridens fratribus et sororibus*). Although many saints, over the centuries, have worked miracles which have moved crowds of people to wonder and amazement, in all of Christian hagiography, I have never heard of a miracle which provoked immediate and joyous laughter among those present. Blessed Cecilia, in her *Legenda*, refers to it as "*iocundum miraculum*," "a laughter-stirring miracle."

Laughter was by no means always approved of in the Middle Ages. For example, the medieval contemplative, Mechtild of Magdeburg (who enjoyed for many years a close connection with the Dominican Order) admits that up to a certain stage in her life she considered laughing not only frivolous but "wrong". What changed Mechtild's mind on the subject was a vision she received once on the feast of St Dominic. The Lord explained to her, first of all, that Dominic was a great example of moderation, that he never troubled his fellow Dominicans "with things arising from some whim of his own" and that, in fact, "he often improved the food to help and show affection for his brethren, so that the young brothers might not think back on the world and so that the older ones might not succumb on the way." But then, addressing directly the subject of laughter, the Lord added, and the sentence is memorable, "Whenever Dominic laughed, he did so with the true delight of the Holy Spirit." Another German, the great Dominican, Meister Eckhart, also dares to speak of God's laughter and of "laughter" at the very heart of the Trinity. In an astonishing passage he writes : "the Father laughs at the Son and the Son at the Father, and the laughing brings forth pleasure, and the pleasure brings forth joy, and the joy brings forth love."

These statements are certainly remarkable. But, as we listen to the voices of Mechtild and Eckhart, it might well be that we begin to hear, within us, another voice, a sceptical voice, which says : "Yes – that's fine for the great saints and mystics, but it's too high a conversation for me." But Eckhart, true master that he is, and true Dominican, will not for an instant let us slip away with that little thought. "This joy," he insists, "is near you, it is in you ! There is no one among you whose spirit is so base, whose mind is so weak, no one so far away from God, as not to be able to find this joy within himself...and find it before leaving this Church, and even in this instant to perceive it while I am still preaching ! He can find it, live it and have it within himself as truly as God is God and I am a man."

## **2. St Thomas Aquinas and "the wine of wisdom"**

We don't tend to associate Thomas Aquinas with the idea of drunkenness. We regard him rather – and for good reason – as a very brilliant but sober intellectual. Thomas, however, no less than Jordan of Saxony, uses the image of drinking and of being made drunk to explore some of the most basic aspects of Christian and Dominican experience. "Wine," he notes in his commentary on Boetius' *De Trinitate*, "often signifies divine wisdom," whereas "water signifies secular wisdom." St Thomas, in his own work as a theologian, draws again and again on the wisdom of secular, non-Christian sources, a fact which disturbed more than a few of his own contemporaries. Was there not a danger, they wondered, that such reliance on secular knowledge would in some way water down the great wine of God's teaching ? Thomas confronted this question head on, and answered it with what would seem to be an allusion to Christ's first miracle at Cana in Galilee. Human learning in itself is not, according to Thomas, the problem. If teachers make accurate use of "the water" of secular knowledge, they don't so much "mix water with wine," Thomas argues, but rather change the water of human learning into the wine of Gospel truth !

At one point, in the *Vitae Fratrum*, the Dominicans – these "new-comers" – are said to be not only bearers of the "wine" of Gospel truth, but also gatherers of the "honey" of human wisdom and learning. The text itself says that they are "dispensers of the wine and honey, since they blend in their preaching the sweetness of divine things with the pleasantness of human learning." And, when they "mix the honey with the wine, and pour wine upon the honey, and [give] it to the people to drink," the effect is something great. In the symbolic words of one ecstatic account, those among the people who take this new drink, begin "to run to and fro as if beside themselves with its sweetness."

"Drink, friends, and be intoxicated !" St Thomas cites this astonishing imperative from The Song of Songs in his commentary on Psalm 35. And there he takes the opportunity to speak of the force of the torrent of God's Spirit within the soul. It is, he says, of such force at times that there is no way it can be resisted. "And just as those who hold their mouths to the fountain of wine become drunk or inebriated, likewise those who bring their desires, or hold their mouths, as it were, to the fountain of life and sweetness, become drunk [in the spirit]." Thomas returns to this theme in the *Summa* where he notes, with a single telling phrase, that "just as material wine inebriates literally [i.e. makes the person physically drunk] likewise meditation on wisdom is metaphorically speaking [i.e. at the level of spirit] an intoxicating drink." In another place, also in the *Summa*, Thomas repeats again the happy imperative, "Eat, O friends, and drink, and be inebriated." But this time the phrase occurs in a section where Thomas is reflecting on the love of God poured out for us in the Eucharist. "The love of God," he says, quoting St Gregory the Great, "is never idle." For "wherever it is, it does great works." And so, by allowing ourselves to drink in God's love in the Eucharist, we become, "spiritually gladdened and are, as it were, inebriated with the sweetness of the divine Goodness." Thomas is clearly in no way opposed to the passionate fervour – the "inebriation" to use his own word – which forms part of living faith. That said, however, in his work as theologian and teacher, Thomas much prefers to describe this state with clarity and serenity rather than to manifest it.

### **3. Dominican Men and Women "drunk with love"**

Holy drunkenness is a theme which recurs over and over again in the letters and writings of Catherine of Siena. But when Catherine speaks of spiritual "inebriation" and wholeheartedly recommends it, what she is hoping to see in others is not a wine of temporary elation, a mere drunkenness of feeling, but hearts and minds illumined and refreshed by the new wine of truth. Obedience to that truth and the surrender of one's life to the Word of life, are what matters for Catherine.

But, that being said, it is also important to note that, in Catherine's experience, the grace of faith-conviction is often accompanied by, and assisted by, the grace of an intense religious devotion or enthusiasm. This enthusiasm, though at times it can get out of hand, can be of enormous benefit to the preacher. In one of her letters, written to her close friend, the Dominican preacher, Bartolomeo Dominici, Catherine speaks of "a wine which intoxicates the soul so that the more one drinks of it the more one wants to drink." This "wine" to which Catherine refers is a knowledge of God's love, a knowledge which she desires the preacher to drink in, at the table of the Lamb. "Before I die," she writes to Bartolomeo, "I have desired with desire to celebrate [literally "to do"] Easter with you." And then she adds : "This is the Easter I wish we could celebrate – to see one another at the table of the Immaculate Lamb." And again, "the wine we discover at this table is the opened side of the Son of God."

Catherine is, of course, recalling here Chapter 19, verse 34 of St John's Gospel : "They pierced his side, and immediately there flowed out blood and water." One is inclined, at first, to recoil in horror from this image of utter and complete humiliation. But it was this event, more than any other, which became fundamental for Catherine's faith and hope. As she explained to Bartolomeo, here "the secret of the heart [of Christ] is laid bare." And, as she noted elsewhere in her writings, here the sins of the entire world are washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. Overwhelmed by this thought, Catherine turns in one of her prayers to Christ, and exclaims : "stretched out on the

cross you have embraced us. For you have made a cavern in your open side, where we might have a refuge." In her own deep humility, Catherine is the first to feel the need for this kind of grace or blessing. And so, having herself drunk deep from the wine of God's mercy, and found in Christ her true refuge, Catherine cannot rest until others have been helped to experience the same deep security in God's love, the same profound intoxication.

Something of Catherine's passionate vision finds expression in the work of the German Dominican mystics, Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler. Like Catherine, Eckhart believes that our love for God should be a kind of obsession or an addiction. Catherine had written to the preacher, Bartolomeo : "Behave like someone who drinks a lot, and who becomes drunk and loses himself, and can't see himself any more." And, almost as if to match Catherine's appeal, Eckhart declares : "A man ought not to love a God who is just a product of his thought...because if the thought vanished, God too would vanish." God should be present to a man, Eckhart believes, so as to possess him and be possessed by him completely. "It is," he says, "like a man consumed with a real and burning thirst, who may well not drink and may turn his mind to other things. But whatever he may do, in whatever company he may be, whatever he may be intending or thinking of or working at, still the idea of drinking does not leave him, so long as he is thirsty. The more his thirst grows, the more the idea of drinking grows and intrudes and possesses him and will not leave him."

Johannes Tauler, Meister Eckhart's most famous disciple, takes up the theme of spiritual drunkenness in one of his homilies. Throughout eternity, he states, "we shall drink...in long drafts from the fountainhead which is God's paternal heart." But, now, already in this life, "we draw in as much as we can of this divine draft, and we become so filled with God that we forget ourselves in this overflowing bliss." In fact, so profound is this state, Tauler says, that sometimes "a man will cry aloud, or sing or laugh." Sadly, however, Tauler notes, this kind of holy foolishness will inevitably provoke those "reasonable people" who are "ignorant of the wondrous ways of the Holy Spirit." And they begin to make a fuss : "'Merciful heavens,' they exclaim, 'why are you carrying on in this ridiculous manner ?' They do not see God's hand in it." But of those people who are "inebriated," Tauler says, "love is aflame in them, and it glimmers and glows and consumes them with bliss." A remarkable ecstasy of this kind was experienced once in a dream-vision by one of the German women mystics, the Dominican Margaret Ebner (1291-1351). According to her own account she was allowed, for a few brief moments, to experience something of "the joy and love" experienced by the saints in paradise. She writes :

The choir was brightly illumined...I saw many people behind the choir stalls dressed in white...they all came running over to me with great joy. I was happy and thought I would say, "Jesus Christ," to see how they would respond...they fell down on their knees with great desire and repeated, "Jesus Christ," and they sang with me. From that I gained such great grace and joy that I began to sing the sweet Name of Jesus Christ and they sang with me. And I said : "We should dance." Then they answered : "We should dance and eat and drink with one another."

How wonderful it is that at least some of the writings of the contemplative Dominican nuns have survived ! Given the influence of the nuns on the friars in the Middle Ages, I sometimes wonder if our most famous teachers and mystics in the Order such as, for example, Johannes Tauler, Heinrich Suso and Meister Eckhart, would ever have attained to such great heights of wisdom and spiritual insight without the profound contemplative witness of the enclosed Dominican nuns. In this matter, the case of Margaret Ebner is particularly instructive. Her spiritual friend and director was a priest called Henry of Nordlingen. But so remarkable was the holiness and learning of Margaret she became for Henry, in the end, the guide, the teacher, and the director.

In Henry's words Margaret Ebner was not only "a holy model and a clear mirror" but also "a well-graced way to all divine truth." As a preacher, Henry describes himself as a piper who, with his music, seeks to lead others into the dance of truth and life. (Again that image of the dance !) But he makes a confession, and it is one with which I myself can completely identify. Henry says that, although he is indeed a piper who leads from the front, the melody which he is playing is one that

is understood, and lived out, and danced too, far better by others than by himself. Nevertheless, he is encouraged to believe that, with Margaret Ebner's help, he will, in time, be able "to master the steps of the dance of a true life to the sweet piping [of Christ]."

People, and especially theologians, are often nervous about the phenomenon of intense emotion in the life of prayer. But Johannes Tauler does not hesitate, in his writing, to offer a spirited defense of religious enthusiasm. Nevertheless, he is at pains also to sound a note of caution. He is aware that there are people who can sometimes get so carried away they need to be brought back to earth. They are like children, he says, who have gone down to their father's cellar, stolen the wine and got drunk. The father, as soon as he catches them, makes them suffer for their joys. And "he gives them," Tauler says, "water to drink to make them as sober now as they were drunk before." Clearly, unlike St Catherine, Tauler doesn't have very much practical knowledge of the state of drunkenness ! But, in any case, he goes on at once to spell out what he means. The Lord, he says, "withdraws...their strong wine," that is he takes away "their emotional comforts." God "allows them to grow as sad as they were joyful, as sober as they were drunk before." And since, in their enthusiasm, they had lost all restraint, God "wishes to recall them to sobriety. They are now sober...they have learned what their capabilities and limitations really are, and this makes them calm, sober and at peace."

In the view, then, of St Catherine of Siena and Blessed Johannes Tauler, both sobriety and drunkenness are needed : sobriety, so that we may stay close always to the knowledge of our own limitations, and drunkenness, so that we may "get rid of all coldness," and allow ourselves to become completely addicted to the Word of God and to the task of preaching the Word. According to Catherine the wine – Christ's blood – when it is drunk at the Eucharistic table gives not only "joy to the heart and soul" of those who are present it also "restores the [preacher's] voice."

One well-known effect of drinking is a marked increase in courage. "Dutch courage" it's called in Europe, and in North America they speak of the strength acquired from drink as "beer muscles." Catherine of Siena is well aware that no small courage was needed on occasion to preach the truth. And so, for this reason, she is instinctively drawn to the image or the metaphor of drinking, and she uses it to very considerable effect. Writing of Mary Magdalene, for example, Catherine says : "She didn't think or worry about anything but how she could follow Christ...She was no more self-conscious than a drunken woman." Her only concern was "how she might find and follow her Master." And again : "She wasn't afraid of the Jews, nor did she fear for herself. No, like a passionate lover she ran and embraced the cross...Surely you were drunk with love, O Magdalene ! As a sign that she was drunk with love for her Master, she showed it in her actions toward his creatures, when after his holy resurrection she preached [Christ risen]."

The phrase "drunk with love," repeated twice here, occurs elsewhere in Catherine's writings, but always in a rather astonishing context. For the one described as "drunk with love" is not Mary Magdalene or Catherine or any other preacher of the Word, but...God himself ! It is God, Catherine says, who is "drunk with love for our good." Stunned by this thought, she turns to God in one of her prayers, and exclaims :

You, high eternal Trinity, acted as if you were drunk with love, infatuated with your creature...You, sweetness itself, stooped to join yourself with our bitterness. You, splendour, joined yourself with darkness; you, wisdom, with foolishness; you, life with death; you, the infinite, with us who are finite. What drove you to this ?

Catherine's amazed attention is focused here on the mystery of the Incarnation. But when she begins to meditate also on the mystery of the Cross, her language becomes even more vivid : "O priceless Love ! You showed your inflamed desire when you ran like a blind and drunk man to the opprobrium of the cross. A blind man can't see, and neither can a drunk man when he is fast drunk. And thus he [Christ] almost like someone dead, blind and drunk, lost himself for our salvation !" In St Matthew's Gospel (Mt 11:19) Christ is, of course, accused of being a "drunkard." And here, in this passage, what Catherine in effect is saying, is : Yes, his accusers were correct, in

one sense at least, Jesus was indeed "blind drunk" but drunk with love for our salvation. "O mad lover !" she cries out in The Dialogue, "...Why then are you so mad ?" And the answer : "Because you have fallen in love with what you have made ! You are pleased and delighted over her within yourself, as if you were drunk for her salvation. She runs away from you and you go looking for her. She strays and you draw closer to her. You clothed yourself in our humanity, and nearer than that you could not have come."

Again and again Catherine's meditations on the mystery of the Incarnation and the Passion draw her thoughts back to the mystery of Creation. Why, if God foresaw how deep our failure would be, did he create us in the beginning ? "O unutterable love," she exclaims, "even though you saw all the evils that all your creatures would commit against your infinite goodness, you acted as if you did not see and set your eye only on the beauty of your creature, with whom you fell in love, like one drunk and crazy with love. And in love you drew us out of yourself giving us being." The mere thought of these things was enough, at times, to make Catherine feel dizzy or "inebriated." On the very last line of her Dialogue she confesses with astonishment and joy : "I sense my soul once again becoming drunk ! Thanks be to God!"

### **Conclusion**

A great variety of images has been used, over the centuries, to evoke aspects of the spiritual life, the ladder of perfection, for example, the dark night, the steep ascent of a mountain. But the Dominican men and women of the 13th and 14th centuries liked also, and with a distinct enthusiasm, it would appear, to make use of the image of drinking. They were drawn to it, I suspect, because it answered so well to their sense of the Gospel. Their spirituality was not something tense or introvert or self-preoccupied, but rather joyous and expansive. And so the image of a group of friends or companions drinking together would naturally have appealed to them. Wine or drink is an image of the goodness and sweetness of life. When St Dominic was alive, many of the ascetics of his time – and I am thinking here particularly of the Albigensians – regarded it, as they regarded food and sex, as something evil. But St Dominic, with his own deep understanding of the goodness of all creation, clearly accepted it as something wholesome and good.

Dominican preaching is sometimes described, and for good reason, as doctrinal since it delights in pondering and proclaiming the mysteries of Creation, Incarnation, Redemption and Resurrection. But the manner in which Dominican preachers, like Catherine and Thomas, speak about imbibing the wine of the mystery of Christ, alerts us to the fact that real "knowing" is always accompanied by a certain amazement. The wine of truth which Christ gives us to drink is also a wine of astonishment. What we preach, then, are not just truths about God. We preach a wine of truth which we have actually tasted ourselves, and have drunk with living faith and joy.

The medieval Dominicans, being not only celebrants of grace but also defenders of nature, clearly loved the image of drinking and drunkenness because it gave them a vivid way of speaking about preaching – about the need, first, to become "drunk" on the Word, and then about the effects of that encounter with God : the ecstasy of self-forgetfulness, the grace of new joy, the compulsion to share that joy with others, and the gifts of renewed hope and courage.

Of course, Dominicans were not the first people to speak about holy drinking. Centuries prior to the foundation of the Order, the image had already been used, and many times, by other Christian authors and preachers. Here, for example, is a short, beautiful passage from an anonymous homily inspired by Hippolytus. It concerns the mystery of the transformation of wine into the blood of Christ. The author notes : "We are fed with the bread from heaven, our thirst is quenched with the cup of joy, the chalice afire with the Spirit, the blood wholly warmed from on high with the Spirit."

Dominicans, like everyone else in the Christian tradition, would have felt themselves instinctively drawn to the image of wine since it is an image which comes straight from the heart of the Gospel, and has a profound and direct link to the Eucharist. So it might seem, therefore, that one



is mistaken to read too much into its use by Dominicans, especially since drinking wine was such a common practice in the Middle Ages. One might almost expect to find the image repeated everywhere in the mystical and spiritual literature of the period. But, curiously, in the *Fioretti* of St Francis of Assisi, for example, there is only one brief passage which refers to drinking. By contrast, in the early Dominican text, *Vitae Fratrum*, the image occurs again and again.

Very often when people are thinking or speaking about the spirituality of the Dominican Order there is a tendency, with respect to a phrase such as "sober intoxication," for example, to give more weight to the adjective "sober" than to the noun "intoxication." It is an understandable tendency and, in respect of the work of many Dominican authors, often a wise one. The adjective "sober" sits particularly well with the work of someone like St Thomas Aquinas, or with that of his contemporary, Humbert of Romans, or with the work of the later scholastics. But if one is considering the life and work of other Dominicans, such as the exuberant and generous preacher, Blessed Jordan of Saxony, or the irrepressible Italian mystic, St Catherine of Siena, or the colourful and intensely devout German friar, Blessed Henry Suso, or the great and daring thinker and visionary, Meister Eckhart, then clearly the word "sober," for all its sane, and sharply qualifying wisdom, will need to have placed – and close beside it – the noun "intoxication."

The Christian gospel has many humble and practical applications but, at its core, it contains a vision extravagant in range and scope. Well worth remembering, therefore, and especially in an age of new evangelization, are these words from Eric Hoffer's book, *The True Believer*. Hoffer writes : "Those who would transform a nation or the world cannot do so by breeding and captaining discontent or by demonstrating the reasonableness and desirability of the intended changes or by coercing people into a new way of life. They must know how to kindle and fan an extravagant hope." It was no accident that Pope Paul VI, when he was reflecting on the mystery of Christian hope, chose to define it as "hope for something that is not seen, and that one would not dare imagine." The Christian gospel is a gospel of vision or it is nothing at all.

There were many different kinds of men and women who followed faithfully the path of Dominic in the early centuries of the Order. But they did have one thing in common. All of them, after the example of Dominic, had learned to drink deep from the wine of God's Word. And they became, we can say, witnesses not only of certain great moral and doctrinal truths, but witnesses also of an unimaginable joy. To those who heard the Friars Preachers speak, for example, or who met them on their journeys, or who read their writings, it must have seemed, at times, as if simple, ordinary words had somehow caught fire – as after Pentecost – and were burning with a wisdom not of this earth. But what, we might ask, of the ministers of the Word today ? Are there any who have the same capacity for vision, the same courage to proclaim to the world something more than the bland commonplaces of popular wisdom ? Are we too sane and sensible to become drunk on the Word ?

St Thomas, when in the *Summa* he is discussing the question of drunkenness, surprises us all of a sudden by drawing attention to a vice or failure the very opposite of drunken excess, a vice which he says has no name, but which, perhaps, we might call the vice of being too sober. Now being too sober, in relation to actually drinking alcohol, may or may not be a problem for preachers or pastors today ! But, at the spiritual level, at the level of prayer life and preaching, those of us who are ministers of the Word, stand perhaps accused of being too sensible, too sober, too safe. Towards the end of his remarkable study, *Enthusiasm*, Ronald Knox writes : "Men [and women] will not live without vision; that moral we do well to carry away with us from contemplating, in so many strange forms, the record of the visionaries. If we are content with the humdrum, the second-best, the hand-over-hand, it will not be forgiven us."

"Let us behave like the drunkard," Catherine of Siena advises us. And she is not alone. Along with her, in many different forms, but always with something of the same impressive insistence, there speaks the witness – the teaching – of two centuries of Dominican tradition. "Let us behave like the drunkard who doesn't think of himself but only of the wine he has drunk and of the wine that remains to be drunk!"

---

**NOTE**

Most if not all of this paper, "Drinking in the Word," will be published in a book which I am in the process of writing in these days and weeks. The book, entitled *A Drink Called Happiness : The New Wine of Dominican Spirituality*, will be published early next year in England and the United States by Burns&Oates/Continuum Publishers. At that point all the footnotes, which are not included here, will be provided.