



Office of Mission and Ministry

PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

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St. Dominic AND THE POWER OF WORDS



uring the canonization process for St. Dominic in 1233 one witness, John of Spain, testified that St. Dominic “always carried round with him the gospel of Matthew and the letters of Paul, and he read them so often that he knew them by heart.”¹ That is one reason why the Dominican artist Fra Angelico depicted St. Dominic seated at the foot of the Cross meditating on the Word of God, and why his iconography generally portrays him holding a book of the gospels close to his heart.

No doubt these sacred texts sustained St. Dominic’s prayer. They also inspired his preaching and his idea for an Order of Friars Preachers. For steeped as he was in the words of St. Matthew’s gospel and the letters of St. Paul, St. Dominic could not but be moved to refute one of the most popular yet dangerous ideas of his day.

The thirteenth century was a time of rapid social change and one in which people were beset with a welter of ideas that vied for their loyalty. Given this, people longed for guidance and a witness to the

Christian faith that bore the stamp of authenticity. Sadly the church was ill equipped to provide what people needed. The clergy was often poorly educated, corruption was rife, and what witness there was to the gospel was often by default. Indeed, as the Dominican historian Fr. M.H. Vicaire has noted, it was a time that required “Saints capable of changing... hearts and convictions,”² but unfortunately a time when such saints were wanting.

As a result heresies like Albigensianism provided an attractive alternative. Named for the southern French city of Albi and more properly known as Cathari, Albigensians were admired for their evident piety. Indeed, the elect among them, called the *perfect*, demonstrated an asceticism and generosity that was otherwise rare and that earned them the sobriquet “good Christians.” Moreover, they proposed to solve the problem of the relationship between matter and spirit with a simplicity and clarity that eluded orthodox explanations.

They argued that the material world is the result of an evil Creator and therefore is inherently evil, while the spiritual world is the result of a good God and therefore is inherently good. Between good and evil there can be no compromise, and thus between

A WORD OF WELCOME

We are delighted to welcome Gail Berkowitz to our midst as a campus minister. A native of New Jersey, Gail received her bachelor’s degree from Duquesne University with a double major in psychology and theology, and her master’s degree in pastoral ministry from the University of Dayton. Prior to coming to Providence College, Gail worked at Covenant House in Atlantic City as a youth advisor, as a coordinator of youth ministry at Guardian Angel parish in Allendale, N.J., and as a graduate assistant in Christian leadership at Dayton. Gail will have primary responsibility for implementing *Casting a Broader Net*, and will coordinate the retreat program for the spring semester.

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A WORD FOR OUR STUDENTS *(continued)*

Democrat; globalization and hunger; Catholic perspectives on Election 2008; and how to discern vocations to the priesthood, religious life, and marriage.

This is all the more impressive for the fact that some 450 students attended the programs. In the middle of a busy day, in the evening, or well into the night, students have listened, questioned, discussed and sometimes debated issues of faith and morality not because they had to, or in order to earn class credit, but simply because they wanted to.

This suggests what should never be in doubt, namely, that grace is ubiquitous and that despite appearances to the contrary, many students are apt to respond to it. Like all of us, they yearn for the Truth that can dispel darkness and the Love which alone can satisfy the heart’s desires. This is why our words matter. They can introduce students to the living Word of God, who is Jesus. And it is this Jesus who will provide the alternative they need, and desire, and so change their lives. It is also why your prayers matter. Pray that we might find the words that our students need to hear and hearing them, hear the one Word that matters most of all.

¹ S. Tugwell, O.P.(Editor). *The Early Dominicans: Selected writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1982. p. 75.

² M.H. Vicaire, O.P. *Saint Dominic and His Times*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1962. p. 71.

³ I Corinthians 15:20-23

⁴ *Fundamental Constitutions of the Order of Friars Preachers*, no. 1 and 2.

⁵ J. A. DiNoia, O.P. *Clearing Away the Barriers: Preaching to Young Adults Today*. The Carl J. Peter Lecture at the Pontifical North American College, December 2008.

⁶ C. Smith & M.L. Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁷ D. Freitas. *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America’s College Campuses*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

matter and spirit there can be no peace. Therefore believers were urged to forsake the created order—the world of the body, with its needs and desires that often seem at odds with higher aspirations—and embrace what is spiritual. Indeed, the most devout among them, the *perfect* or “good Christians,” would literally starve themselves to death so that their souls could be released from the prison of their bodies and find their proper, spiritual home with God.

Obviously such extreme measures were hardly for everyone. Yet even those who were incapable of imitating the self immolation of the *perfect* were not without hope. The *perfect* could perform a ritual called the *consolamentum* for them at the hour of death, and thus by a sacrament of their own merit ensure that those who were less heroic could yet enjoy the blessings of a spiritual life with God.

Such views were stark contrast to St. Matthew’s gospel, in which the bodily humanity of Jesus is evident at his birth, in his passion and death, and at his resurrection, and with St. Paul’s insistence that it is only by the merits of Jesus that we are saved. Indeed, it is precisely because Jesus is fully human that his resurrection becomes the promise of our own salvation. As St. Paul notes, “...now Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came also through a human being. For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life, but each one in proper order: Christ the firstfruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore salvation consists not in an escape from the body but in being raised to new life, body and soul, and is achieved not by dint of one’s own effort,

as it was for the *perfect*, but by the saving death and resurrection of Jesus.

Given his experience among the Albigensians, it is not surprising that St. Dominic was inspired to found an Order dedicated to preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. He wanted his friars to supply the words that people needed to hear: words that would illumine the gospel, and

thus correct error; words that would make the Word of God accessible to people of the day and in the circumstances of their lives; and words that would convey the infinite reach of God’s mercy. In sum he wanted to ensure that everyone, not just the *perfect*, could aspire to the gift of salvation offered by the God who created us, who sustains us in the present, and who has redeemed us in his Son.

Implicit in St. Dominic’s vision for his Order is a conviction that in matters of faith words matter. They have the power to reveal the Word of God and the power to obscure it, and so they

have the power to lead people to the truth and the power to seduce them into error. This suggests a way to measure the effect of *our* words.

Whether by vows of religion or affiliation with the Order and the College, each of us been entrusted with “the proclamation of the Word of God...for...the salvation of souls.”^{iv} We should therefore ask ourselves a simple but critical question each day. Do my words lead people closer to God, or away from him? Given the importance of the answer we should imitate St. Dominic and meditate on that Word each day, and pray that God will give us words that people need to hear.

Detail from a fresco in the Priory of San Marco, Florence by Fra Angelico, c.1438-1450



A WORD FOR OUR STUDENTS

Like people of an earlier age our students are beset with many and competing appeals for their loyalty. Some appeals invite them to do just what the Albigensians did, that is, separate matter and spirit, body and soul, and thus disjoin their sexuality from considerations born of faith. Others urge them to mute the distinctiveness of the Christian message in deference to an ethic that purports to be tolerant of people of different beliefs but that ends by betraying any hope for salvation.^v Still others distract them from the appeal of religion, blunting their willingness to entertain deep questions of meaning and value, and leaving them—in large numbers, especially among Catholics—disengaged and uninterested.^{vi}

But it would be wrong to think that these appeals are made explicitly in an effort to challenge students’ faith. Rather the challenge is implicit and is embedded in student culture, and as such has the appearance of being normative. It is less the case, therefore, that students are actively questioning their faith and finding it wanting than it is that they are unreflectively adopting the norms of their peers. The hope is that if they can become reflective about what they believe and how they live then they can entertain an alternative that leaves room for the role of religious faith.

A case in point is evident in a study conducted by Donna Freitas. Although she found that a majority of college students participate in the “hook up” culture of excessive drinking followed by sex with relative strangers, 40% of those who do regret it and wish that they could do otherwise.^{vii} Like the people of southern France in the thirteenth century, therefore, many of our students may hold beliefs and live lives at odds with the faith of the church less from a sense of conviction than in the absence of a compelling religious alternative.

This is one reason why *Casting a Broader Net*, the plan for outreach and evangelization at Providence College, makes provision for students at every level of faith commitment and through the several lenses of service, catechesis, and spiritual formation. We assume that given the right opportunity disengaged students, for whom religion is irrelevant, can become seekers for whom religious questions assume a critical importance, and that in time, seekers will become devout and be

eager to build a bridge between their faith and every other aspect of their lives.

Critical to this effort is catechesis. Since research suggests that Catholic young people are especially ill informed about their faith, instruction and teaching about the faith is of central importance. But how to reach students becomes the challenge given that many are disengaged. That is why Campus Ministry, largely under the guidance of Fr. Augustine Judd, O.P., assistant chaplain, invites students to learn about the faith in ways both formal and informal, across a wide variety of topics, and in several venues.

Formally, this includes the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* in which students spend the better part of six months studying and discussing the faith in preparation for receiving the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. Less formally it includes *Theology on Tap*, which meets students on their own turf, as it were, in McPhail’s; *Caffeinated Catholicism*, which offers fair trade coffee and serious discussions about topical issues of faith; *Just Lunch*, which includes a presentation on Catholic social teaching, light lunch, and discussion; and the *Chaplain’s Bible Study*. In addition there are requests for lectures and discussions on various topics, and presentations co-sponsored with other groups on campus.

The variety of topics that were covered this past fall was impressive, and included: God, the Trinity, and Jesus; the seven sorrows of Mary; the meaning and purpose of suffering; Catholic beliefs about ghosts, goblins, and demons; the morality of tattoos; being pro-life and a