

My Personal View of Dominic

By Sr Patricia Hannan OP

I first met Dominic through the Dominican Sisters who taught me at St Catherine's College in Invercargill. I was there for twelve years between the ages of 5 and 17. They were followers of Dominic and they tried to live the way he urged his companions to live, taking every opportunity to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. I admired those Sisters. They cared about us, they were good teachers, and not just academically. They tried to hand on to us a rich culture in art, drama, literature and music, and a breadth of vision. They were women of prayer, serving the pursuit of Truth. I used to stand on the steps of the parish church and watch the nuns praying the Divine Office in their old wooden chapel on the next property. The Sisters were good fun, enjoyed one another's company, and had a basic happiness about them that many of us found attractive.

All of those qualities are found in Dominic. He was well educated, study mattered to him, but people mattered more. When he was at university there was a famine, so he sold his precious books to get money to feed the poor. Remember that in those days books were extremely expensive, handmade and hand written. He was a man of prayer and contemplation; he was full of joy – he had an attractive personality. He looked at the needs of his time and then found practical ways to respond. I wasn't the only one to find Dominic through those Dominican sisters in Invercargill. Twelve of my school companions also joined the Dominicans.

Dominic lived over 800 years ago and the only way we can know him is from what other people have written, and from the oral tradition in the regions where he lived and worked. He met a widespread heresy in France that taught that a good spirit created spiritual things and an evil spirit created all that is material. Immediately Dominic began spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ, that God is at the foundation of everything created, and God is good. Dominic was too busy living and preaching the Gospel to write about how to do it. He didn't write a whole lot of rules and instructions for his friends – Scripture was enough. And he didn't set himself up as the one in charge. All those who worked with him had a say in what would happen next. He jumped ahead of his time and founded the first fully democratic institution in the Church. The family of Christian preachers that Dominic gathered together were a motley lot: men and women, lay and religious, contemplatives, and contemplative preachers who took to the road.

When Dominic went to the Pope to get approval for his group of followers, he didn't take a rule and constitutions, the structural bones of a religious order. He asked for a decree giving his followers authority to preach the Gospel. Even more daring was this idea of making his followers full time preachers. In those days preaching was the privilege of bishops. Even parish priests did not have the right to preach. This meant that Dominican preachers did not have the advantage of episcopal status or authority. They had to be charismatic and attractive, with only the truth of their words and the truth of their lives to rely on. All of them spread the Gospel to the people of their day. The Pope admired what they were doing in southern France and didn't just give them authority to preach, he gave them a decree with papal authority to preach the Gospel to every country where ever they went. Dominican records show that this was true right from the beginning, 800 years ago. Even in my lifetime preaching has been understood as sermons given in church. But for the last 30 years or so, something new has been happening. All over the world, Sisters and Lay Dominicans have been claiming their identity as preachers. To be a preacher is to be someone sent by God, but we are not all sent in the same way. It means that every one of us is sent by God to those we meet. For many of us this can mean being sent to another place. But just as often, Dominican men and women accept their mission by remaining where they are, and being a word of life there.

As I said before, we can learn about Dominic from the oral tradition in the regions where he lived and worked. I have spent time in Spain, southern France and Italy. Even after 800 years, Dominic is remembered there. In Calaruega where he was born there is a statue of him in the village square. The people are proud of him and admire what he achieved, but at the age of around nine, Dominic left home for school, university, and then life as a canon regular of the cathedral in Osma, so, in fact, the people love his mother more. They knew her better. She fed and clothed the local poor. People could go to her with their needs and worries and receive help. In the Toulouse- Languedoc area where Dominic was based as a preacher from about 1203 onwards, there are banners on lamp posts proclaiming the area as Dominic country. In the village churches there are plaques announcing that Dominic preached there. He must have made a soul stirring impression. Can you remember who gave the homily in your parish church just a couple of months ago on Easter Sunday?

Dominic combined treasures old and new. He drew from the apostles their preaching ministry, went to the monks for their contemplative ideal, borrowed from the canons regular the characteristics of religious life and took from the Gospel movements of his day, clerical and lay, their ideas of preaching in evangelical poverty. He blended these elements in a unique way. People flocked to the Dominican Family in Dominic's time, because with his passion for preaching, he invited them to take part in an adventure. For what are we passionate and what are the adventures for our time? Who and what are the challenges for us? We are surrounded by a different heresy. Society teaches us that all that is material is good and all that is spiritual, especially belief in God and the Christian message is at best, irrelevant. This has led to an economy with huge gaps between the rich and the poor. Misuse of workers abounds at many levels; science and theology are often seen as incompatible; the meaning of being human is devalued; land and creation is abused.

What would a 21st century Dominic do? I think Dominic would focus on the value and goodness of individual people and the strength they can gain from mutual support. He would listen carefully to vulnerable people: those being trafficked, refugees and asylum seekers, victims of exclusion and prejudice. I think he would have a deep care for creation and listen to the voices of those living on small islands in the Pacific. I think he would be full of joy and hope as he met people searching for truth. Dominic fascinates me by his freedom, freedom to be poor, itinerant, different. He had the freedom of the compassionate person, who dared to see, listen and respond.