

“ST DOMINIC” IN DOMINICAN SERIES 9 JUNE, 2016

Saturday week ago, I listened to our Diva interviewer, Kim Hill, talk with Professor Richie Poulton director of the Otago University’s longitudinal study of 1,000 young people. This has been going for more than 40 years, and is widely regarded as the most comprehensive such study in the world. Poulton astounded me by saying that his colleagues could look at any child by the age of three, and quite accurately predict what that child would become – saint, sinner, criminal or Trump! He pipped the Jesuits by four years in their old saying: **“Give me a child until the age of seven and I will give you the man”!**

If anyone fitted this new idea of **give me a child aged three**, Dominic would take the cake. What chance did he have. The facts were stacked against him. His Mum, Jane of Aza, and one of his brothers, Manés, were to become “blesseds”; his other brother, Antonio, became a priest. It’s a pity his Dad, Felix, was just the universal lord and provider from their castle in Caleruega, a tiny Spanish military outpost in the middle of nowhere! At the tender age of seven, Dominic was sent to his priest-uncle close by for his early education. Mum and Dad had already determined he would become a priest. At age 14, he was sent to university at Palencia in neighbouring Leon to study arts and theology. We are told that Dominic was by now a studious young man who loved the scriptures, and had memorized much of the New Testament. Here comes **the first** of what I regard are the **three great pivot moments** in his life. Famine had seized Palencia. People were dying of hunger. Our Dom, following his mother’s charitable genes, sold the extremely valuable vellum study books he possessed – the result of coming from a wealthy family - and gave the proceeds to the poor.

Do you remember James K Baxter’s 1969 poem to Jesus entitled “Song”? There’s a refrain that runs through this three times:

“Truth” – he said – and “Love” – he said
But his purest word was – “Mercy” –

All three of these words will keep resonating throughout Dominic's life, but here so truly, the purest word was **MERCY**.

We are told this extravagant gesture shamed the university authorities into doing something similar. Moreover, the Bishop of his Diocese of Osma, Martin, got to hear of this, and sent a scout to invite Dominic to become a canon of the Cathedral, just 35 km away from his home town. Thus around the age of 26, Dominic joined the canons, was ordained, and soon after became the community's subprior. He helped Diego, Bishop Martin's successor, to reform the 12 canons of the Cathedral into a more prayerful community, living lives akin to the apostles of the early church in Jerusalem. **What chance did Dominic have with this background**, all done before age 30, with 21 no less challenging years ahead of him.

The **second pivotal point** came in 1203, when Bishop Diego took his friend Dominic to be his companion on the diplomatic mission given him by King Alfonso IX of Castille. His task was to search out a bride for his son, Ferdinand. Thus began a series of four arduous journeys to Denmark and back. The first Journey was successful: an alliance was made, and our diplomats returned to Spain. Journey II failed, because the young betrothed woman they sought to accompany to Spain had either died or entered a monastery! Diego and Dominic returned now via Rome, **yes Rome**, with a dedicated purpose in their minds.

All of these journeys had a markedly profound effect on our young brother, who till then had lived a predictably sheltered life – not needing to move any further than 100 kms from home. I remember well the first time I left New Zealand aged 24 for lil'o' Australia: all my faculties were highly attuned to new experiences and ideas. I am sure that it was the same for Dominic. On this first journey away from Osma in 1203, Diego and he stayed at a hostelry in Toulouse. The inn-keeper was a Cathar, a convert to the dualist and completely perfectionist heresy that had recently made its way into Europe.

There is important background to Dominic's simple two-way conversation with the inn-keeper. These were heady times. Europe was changing from a rural feudal system of lords and serfs where the few were rich and the majority held in poverty, to the new cities and towns where early forms of democracy quickly found a home. A communal guild structure grew, and with it a new political class, as ordinary low-class people skilled in many trades flocked from the countryside to the towns, seeking guild membership and the protection that brought. It was also time of glory for powerful bishoprics, rich monasteries, and many churches. The most powerful pope ever, Innocent III, watched over and tried - **with some success** - to guide the Church. However on the negative side, there was rising political anarchy, and many religious problems. There was a shortage of well-trained and disciplined parish clergy. People at the local level were yearning for spiritually nourishing liturgy and homilies, but the majority were left searching, and in ignorance. No wonder new heresies flowing in from Eastern Europe became popular. No wonder that people took things into their own hands, and some strange lay movements burgeoned seeking to fill these spiritual gaps. "**D.I.Y. methods flourished.**" No-one in the mainstream Church seemed able to help.

That's a little background to pivot point two in Dominic's life. We are told that Dominic stayed up all night talking with the inn-keeper who by morning had reverted to his old allegiance of Catholic faith. Catharism is a strongly dualistic religion: the body and everything created is bad. The soul alone is good and to be fostered. The purpose of life is to free oneself from contagious slavery to the bad created world, by living apart in perfect isolation. We have no idea what was said by these two men, but two things stick in my mind. The first is that from this point on I know that Dominic must have been a good listener. He must have allowed his new-found friend to talk freely. No one will unburden himself to someone who is unable to hear his point of view, who is not sensitive and open to what is being said to him, and who is totally non-defensive. Only then could truly dialogue begin. I expect they talked for hours. Secondly, Dominic had a very flexible and nuanced view of what preaching is about, for Dominic's

vision of the person of Jesus Christ dead and risen in the power of the Spirit, was communicated in a way that rang true to the inn-keeper. Truth had changed him.

Again Baxter rings clearly:

Truth – he said – and “Love” – he said
But his purest word was “Mercy”.

The **third pivotal point** came when Bishop Diego and Dominic met the four papal legates at Montpellier in 1205. Dominic was now 35. Our two protagonists had gone to Innocent III on the way back from their second diplomatic Journey requesting they be sent to the unconverted peoples of Eastern Europe. The experience of two long journeys opened their eyes to opportunities of preaching the word in new places to people who had never heard of Christ. The Pope refused this fine request and sent them post haste – to put it bluntly - to do the dirty work in their own backyard by facing the Cathars. The four Cistercian papal legates, already sent by Pope Innocent to convert the Cathars, were struggling to know how to face the heresy and getting nowhere. They were discouraged, and wanted to go home. Here Diego and Dominic’s backgrounds kicked in. All they’d learned as reformed canons brought them to this decisive insight. Diego proposed that all six of them lay aside their horses and princely trappings and go out to preach the word of God on foot, begging for their food. The Cathars’ success had come because of their poor lives and preaching. These seemed authentic to the local people. In other words, the Cathars must be beaten them at their own game. The legates agreed that if people could be found, they would accept this proposal. Immediately Diego and Dominic offered themselves, and their offer was accepted.

In my judgment **everything else is history**. In embryo, at this point, the whole Order was implicitly present: as humble, simple preachers of the Word, nothing more. No matter that it took another 13 years and much trial and error before the bones of the preaching friars were fully enflashed. The Order of Preachers is largely the same today as it was that day. It is for this we celebrate 800 years on!

Again Baxter rings in my ears. Christ words were 'truth', 'love' and 'mercy'. They were pure words in the mouths of humble authentic apostles like Dominic and Diego. It was this Word, the word of God that these two men knew intimately and from the heart. Their long study of the scriptures had prepared them. Jesus Christ, dead and risen in the power of the Spirit was their inspiration in all that they would do thereafter: preaching that word insistently, disputing with the heretics, facing popular debate. Around 1210 comes an important development: **like a fourth pivot point**. The bishop of Toulouse, Bishop Fulk, in a stroke of genius suggested first that Dominic form the group that had gathered around him into a diocesan preaching community who took vows studied together and supported each other's preaching, and secondly that Dominic seek approval for this new development from the Pope. It was Pope Honorius III who signed the decree that set up the Order on December 22, 1216. It was Honorius, too, who had the foresight to widen the scope of the fledgling Order from being "the Preachers of Toulouse", as they had become known locally, to being preachers to the world. The Order was ready to fly!!!

Somehow Dominic's new rhythm of life, of quiet contemplation leading to active preaching, set young people (not just friars but nuns and lay people) on fire. There was a veritable explosion, with friars taking on a huge raft of new missionary challenges. Dominic had listened to many people, used their ideas and added some of his own. He was quintessentially a team player, a man of consensus. But it was the power and energy he received from his loving contemplation of God, and his passion for the truth that helped him complete the draining work of setting up the Order's structure by the day he died on August 6, 1221.

On August 15, 1217 Dominic had dispersed his local group of 17 men to four carefully chosen cities: Rome Bologna, Paris and Madrid telling these startled men that "hoarded grain rots". Who could have anticipated that **just four years later**, the Order would have 1,000 friars in five European provinces (Spain, Provence, France, Lombardy

and Rome), with friars spread over six other countries: England, Germany, Hungary, Scandinavia, Poland and Greece. And that by the end of the 13th century, just 80 years after Dominic's death, there were 404 priories, almost 15,000 friars, and many more provinces including one in the Holy Land.

The former Master of the Order, Timothy Radcliffe, wrote that “all through the history of the Order, our study of the gospel and our preaching have had to face the challenge of new ways of seeing the world, new technologies, new intellectual tools.” **It goes without saying that all these are built on the love, truth and mercy of Jesus, the Word who is within the heart of every authentic Dominican preacher. Dominic rules, OK!**