

Dominican Spirituality
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In the thirteenth century, the great Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas considered the manner of life which our Lord led during his sojourn on this earth. In his considerations, Thomas wondered whether, in fact, Jesus Christ might have better lived a different sort of life. Should he have lived a solitary life, rather than one in which he mingled with other people? Should he have lived an austere life, as had John the Baptist, or even as he himself had done in his forty days in the desert? Should he have had moderate financial means, or even a life of riches and honor, rather than a life of poverty?

Of course, in asking these questions, Thomas Aquinas did not mean to offer constructive criticism to the Almighty; the life Jesus led was the life he should most fittingly have lived, chosen from all eternity in wisdom and love. However, what is striking are the reasons Thomas adduces for explaining why Jesus lived the kind of life he did: a life shared with others, with ordinary food, drink and shelter, but with voluntary poverty. He *might* have led a different sort of life, says Thomas, except that the life of *preaching and teaching* requires a certain form of living. So, says Thomas, while a solitary life of contemplation is, all things being equal, preferable to a life bound up in earthly activity, the highest form of life is an active life of preaching and teaching, which presupposes a richness of contemplation, and which gives to others the fruits of contemplation. Likewise, while austerity of food and clothing are not necessary to salvation, he says, a life bound up in the cares of worldly things is incompatible with the ministry of

preaching and teaching, which is itself more suited to a life of voluntary poverty.

Why is all of this striking? It sounds audacious because it sounds as though Thomas Aquinas has said, in so many words, that Jesus Christ was a Dominican! After all, the life of the Order of Preachers, a life of prayer and contemplation, lived in common in voluntary poverty, directed to the preaching of the Gospel and the salvation of souls *is* the very life Thomas noted was the life which our Savior led. However, the order of thought in Thomas is of course exactly the opposite. The Dominicans live the way they do, they pursue the life of the Good News in the manner they do, because they share in the mission of Christ and *precisely* patterned after Jesus' earthly ministry of *preaching and the salvation of souls*. In other words, the Dominican life, and so the spirituality which animates it, is a spirituality of being *on mission*, which is itself more clearly in English rendered *being sent*, or, from the Greek of our New Testament, being *apostolic*. As the life of Jesus, sent into the world for the preaching of the Good News and the salvation of souls, forms the fundamental pattern of the Dominican way of entering the mystery of God's life, we must admit that, as we are not ourselves the Word made flesh, so our way of living out this same life will be necessarily different. Of course, we are not without models and examples. If ours is a spirituality of *being sent* then our examples, models, and pattern will be seen in the life of those whom Jesus sent, which is to say, in the *Apostles*.

If the life of a preacher is the life of an apostle, it will be worth our while to attend, if briefly, to what the sacred Scriptures tell us about the apostolic life. we turn, not surprisingly, to the Acts of the Apostles

Acts 1:14 — All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

Acts 1:21-22 — [on the need to find a replacement among the Twelve for Judas Iscariot] “Therefore it is necessary that one of the men who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which he was taken up from us, become with us a witness to his resurrection.”

And, speaking of the community which formed around the Apostles:

Acts 2:42 — They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.

Acts 2:44-47 — All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all and to each one’s need. Each day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people.

What do we learn from these images of the life of the apostles in the earliest days of the Church? What pattern did St Dominic and his brothers and sisters in the Order of Preachers follow from these short but compelling accounts?

What we see is that the apostolic life, and so its spirituality, is *contemplative, orthodox, ecclesial, inclusive, Marian, liturgical, communal and personal, public and intimate, and convivial*. It is *contemplative* because it begins and ends in prayer. The apostles began their life not by going forth, but by listening, by attending to every word and deed of Jesus, by letting him speak and do, while they received what he gave them, waiting finally for his gift of the Spirit to make it clear to them. It is *orthodox* insofar as it seeks to proclaim nothing other than what the apostles

learned from Jesus himself, even as the selection of Matthias to replace Judas was rooted in his having been with Jesus from the beginning. It is the whole, authentic Gospel we preach. It is *ecclesial* because it is a spirituality of the “we” who were in the company of Jesus, the “we” who heard his word and witnessed his resurrection. It is *inclusive* insofar as it is a way of life which gathers together men and women who were with Jesus and are devoted to him in prayer. However else there may be distinctive roles (friars, nuns, sisters, laity), they are all one in their being called and being sent. It is *Marian* because, like the apostles in the upper room, it gathers around the mother of the Lord, whose privileged witness and experience of the life, death, and resurrection of her Son draws us all more deeply into the Christian mystery. It is through our sharing in his mysteries through her mysteries, the life of the Rosary, that we draw nearer to her Son. It is *liturgical* because, as the apostles were devoted to prayer and the breaking of the bread, so the Preachers’ spirituality is devoted to the prayer of the Church: the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours. It is at once *communal and personal*, sharing all things in common, yes, but attending to the needs of each individual, seeing in the common good the fulfillment of our private hopes, and in enriching our individual selves, the prospering of the whole. It is *public and intimate* because it is a life in the one sense on display (as the apostles met in the Temple area) but one which also calls for a withdrawal into a literal or figurative cloister, the breaking of bread *in their homes*. Finally, but by no means least, this is a life which is *convivial*. It is so not just literally (i.e. a life lived together), but in the richer sense of a life which seeks joy and real, sincere sharing in the ordinary tasks of life, seen most fully in the joys of the common table at dinner.

To be a Dominican, then, is to live at the heart of the Church, *studious* for the Gospel in all senses of the word: both reading it carefully and daily to understand it fully and to understand all other kinds of knowledge which will disclose its hidden riches, and *studious* meaning “zeal”, a drive to live out the life we have learned in the Scriptures. It is a life shared, a life on public display but not ashamed to retreat like Jesus to the silence of the sea, the mountain, or the desert, where we might come better to know our God who sent us. It is nothing other than to pattern our life on the earliest pattern offered by the Scriptures of Christian community. *To contemplate and to give to others the fruits of contemplation.* That is the life of our Lord; that is the life of Mary his mother; that is the life of the Order of Preachers.

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