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800 YEARS LATER: TOGETHER AT THE FAMILY TABLE

USA - We were all born into a family. Early on we learned that we did not choose our families; we inherited them. They are part of the 'package called life.' This inheritance usually seems like a pretty marvelous thing to us, but if we are really honest, we would have to confess that at some time or other (during our adolescent years, for example) we have wondered if there might not be some way to return this 'package' for a model more to our liking, more *stylish*. That, of course, is impossible. Our family is just that – *ours*. Trade-ins are not accepted.

The Church is also a family – inherited, not chosen. One day – at least for most of us – when we were just a few days or months old, some adults took us to a church, dressed us in white (uncomfortably ridiculous), sang a few songs, and poured *cold* water over our heads. «Welcome to the Church,» proclaimed the priest. People applauded, smiled, took photographs, and in some cases there was a little party. Of course, *no one* asked us if we wanted to be part of this family.

Something similar happened when we said 'yes' to Dominican life, as well. Though in this case we had the freedom to choose to belong to this new family (composed of lay men and women, nuns and friars, sisters and members of the International Dominican Young Adult Movement), we did not have the privilege of being able to choose our co-pilgrims for this new journey. From one day to the next we found ourselves in the midst of a sea of people who

were saying, 'Hello, brother! How are you doing, Sister?' And that's just the way it was – all part of the 'Dominican package.'

At first this thing called *Dominican Family* was easy, even romantic! To be part of something so ancient and so sacred fascinated us. Learning to say 'Contemplata aliis tradere' in Latin – Wow! Cool! Awesome! At first one feels really strong, excited, on fire for preaching the Word of God. We wear our Dominican cross with pride – ready to be martyrs and to be fed to the lions for the sake of the Reign of God.

Unfortunately, that romanticism runs pretty thin after awhile, and we begin to look around at the people who are part of our Dominican community, and we hear ourselves murmuring under our breath: «Who invited *her* to be a Dominican? So now the Order receives just about anyone who comes and knocks on the door?» We begin to think that we've made a mistake, and at times we go out looking for a *new family* – more to our liking, more committed, more saintly – because this group lives neither the gospel nor the spirit of St. Dominic. We decide to trade in *the package*. And the reason? «They tricked me.»

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, «Follow me.» And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples,



«Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?» But when he heard this, he said, «Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners» (Mt 9:9-13).

This thing we call 'following Christ' is a mystery. Even though we are called to a life of holiness, a life committed to the values of the Reign of God, we who are called are just a flock of lost and scattered sheep. We find ourselves seated one day at a table full of sinners and we are shocked. And rightly so!

What was Jesus thinking? Was he crazy? How do we proclaim the Good News of God to the whole world if we are a group that is so mediocre, so sinful, and rather worthless? What does it mean to be part of a Church and a Dominican Family so full of sinners?

This year, 2006, we celebrate the Eighth Centenary of the foundation of the community of Prouilhe and the beginnings of the Dominican Family – an event worthy to be commemorated festively. It is a year of pilgrimage and thanksgiving, and in the words of fr Carlos Azpíroz OP, Master of the Order, it is a year to drink «the simple freshness of our 'first love,' seated at the feet of Jesus, to be with him and to listen to him» (*Letter to the whole Order Announcing the Jubilee Year, Prouilhe, 29 April 2006*).

If those of us who are seated at the *Dominican table* for this Jubilee Year, drinking the wine of the Good News and listening to Jesus, look closely enough, we will discover that we are not so different from the group of friends gathered with Jesus in Mathew's house two thousand years ago. We are just a group of mediocre, poor and sinful disciples – the very ones that Jesus «came to call.»

In the year 1206 Dominic welcomed into the inner sanctuary of his compassion a group of poor women – several of whom came from families who had fallen into the dualistic Albigensian heresy. It was because Dominic drew near to them that he was able to welcome them into his heart. This *drawing near in solidarity* was the fruit of his mendicant, contemplative poverty. It is important to remember that the mendicant poverty of Dominic was not something romantic. It flowed from his apostolic zeal. He wanted to be close to the poor and to those who suffer as

a brother, as bearer of a word of hope. In Montpellier in 1206, when Dominic and Bishop Diego met with the Cistercian monks who were attempting to preach the Truth in the midst of the Albigensian heresy, they realized immediately that it was not possible to preach «from a distance,» that is, on horseback, preaching from a position of ecclesiastical power and wealth. The option for a life of mendicant poverty was an apostolic option – a decision to journey in close proximity and solidarity with the poor and those who seemed to be «like sheep without a shepherd» (Mt 9:36).

The goal of mendicant poverty, a part of our Dominican charism, is to be near the poor, attentive to their cry for life and justice. St. Dominic cried out in his night vigils, «Lord, what will become of the poor and of sinners?» precisely because his closeness to «the least of my brothers and sisters» (Mt 25:40) did not permit him to be indifferent. He opened himself to be wounded by the friends that he met along the way. His preaching was for them.

According to historical documents, with Dominic and the sisters at Prouilhe were some preaching companions, as well (not yet *friars*). And as contemplative nun and historian, Sr. Barbara Beaumont OP, points out, in her marvelous conference entitled '*The Coming of the Preachers*' (<http://www.800.op.org/>), there were also – several months later – some lay families who united themselves to the *Holy Preaching*. The whole group was not exactly what one would call a '*salvation army*.' It was simply the beginning of something new, something poor and fragile, something that was apparently the will of God. At the family table in 1206, seated aside brother Dominic, the preacher of grace, were our great-grandmothers and grandfathers – simple people who had a deep longing to drink at the fountain of wisdom and to announce to the world the gratuity of salvation.

The fragile poverty of our preaching family – both in the year 1206 and in 2006 – is not an obstacle for the working of God's grace. In the words of St. Paul, intimate companion and friend of St. Dominic, «When I am weak, then I am strong» (2Cor 12:10). Our own poverty makes us sensitive to the poor, to their cry. Dominic's preaching becomes our preaching each time we contemplate the face of those who are excluded and invisible in our world today and raise our preaching voice on their behalf.

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Today it is our turn to gather once again at our family table to give thanks for this *grace of preaching* which we have inherited from Brother Dominic. Our family is not perfect, but it is *ours*. It is not a family without its problems and sins, without a few wrinkles here and there, but the gift which we have received is marvelously beyond compare. Among us today are brother and sister theologians, poets and professors, Biblical scholars and artists. Some of us are wise, and others less wise; we represent all the colors and continents of the globe. We are the Family of our Father, St. Dominic. Today we are called

to return to the ancient fount of the Word-made-flesh and drink – with Dominic and the early disciples – «the simple freshness of our first love.» But not just that, for once we have sated our thirst at the wellspring of grace, we are then ready for the most important task of all: to go and preach – in season and out – that the Reign of God is at hand.

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ORIGINAL: ENGLISH ■

WITH THE MASTER: NOVEMBER

1 - 25	Plenary session of the General Council
27 - 30	Canonical Visit to the Angelicum