

# The Pillars Revisited

A fresh look at Dominican Spirituality

Donald Goergen OP

The writer is a preacher, lecturer, teacher and author, and is a Dominican of the Chicago Province. He has written and taught primarily in the areas of christology and spirituality. He has been a member of a Dominican Ashram community from its beginning in 1999. His most recent writing is *Fire of Love: Encountering the Holy Spirit*. Check his work further at <http://www.op.org/don/>

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For at least the last forty years, since the 1968 revision of the Constitutions of the Friars of the Order of Preachers, we have spoken about four pillars of Dominican spirituality: prayer, study, the common life, and ministry or preaching and service. Although we have emphasized that Dominic wanted his Order to be one of preachers, we have recognized that the house Dominic built needed a secure foundation, and for that all four pillars were significant. Of course these were not new; they had been integral to the Order from the beginning. They have become, and rightly so, a handy way of explaining ourselves to those outside the family, to novices, as well as to ourselves as we are reminded of the integral spirituality that Dominican life is.

Recently, however, when asked to articulate for a predominantly non-Dominican group what Dominic and Dominican spirituality are about, and tempted to begin with these four pillars, I began to think that, as succinct as they are, they may not be the only way to communicate the spirit of Dominic. So I asked myself the question: if I were to reflect on my own experience as a Dominican and try to convey what it is all about, what would I see as four elements that manifest the vitality, diversity, and core of Dominican life? These are the four pillars that came to me.

## THE SPIRIT OF INTEGRATION

Deep within the Dominican spirit lies an urge toward integration, balance. Dominican spirituality is an integrative, integrating, integral spirituality. We see this manifest in the life of Dominic himself. What he and Diego of Osma proposed as a new and more effective approach to preaching in the south of France was grounded in the awareness that what we proclaim cannot be separated from the witness of the lives we live, that who we are and what we do are integrally tied together. Do we live what we say we believe?

Diego and Dominic saw, in the preaching of the Cathars, how simple living witnessed gospel values. The truth in the Catholic tradition was betrayed by the style of life of clergy. In order for preaching to be evangelical, gospel-centered, there could not be great disparity between truth and life. The challenge to integrate mission and life was deeply ingrained in Dominic's own life and the spirit he bequeathed to his followers. It was manifest in varied ways in those who came after him.

Albert the Great (c. 1200-1280), or Boots, the bishop, as he was later called by some in the region of Bavaria, saw the need even as bishop not to take advantage of his right to travel by horseback but rather retained

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the practice of the friars of traveling by foot — so integral was witness to word. Albert has always been someone difficult to classify. Was he mystic or scholar, natural scientist or theologian, student of nature or of God's Word, pastoral administrator or university professor? It is with reason that he is called doctor universalis. He did not see contradiction between love of the Creator and love of creation. He was equally at home with the mystical writings of Dionysius, the philosophy of Aristotle, and the fauna and flora of his world: a spirit of deep integration.

This open-mindedness, this ability to see seeds of truth everywhere, this propensity to give a wide variety of opinions a fair hearing whether they came from within the Jewish, the Christian, the Islamic or the pagan world is manifest in Albert's student, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Thomas's openness to and integration of the thought of Aristotle as well as the emphasis he placed on both reason and faith is classic. One need only go to the structure of his mature work in the *Summa*. He finds truth in the objections to an opinion and the *sed contra*s rarely manifest the fullness of his own thought. His approach is always 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand,' from which he is able to come to a deeper understanding of the truths of the faith. Like Albert, he turns to Scripture, to natural philosophy and metaphysics, to prayer and liturgy for wisdom and insight. He is both respectful of tradition in his appreciation of Augustine and the Lombard as well as innovative in his courage to sustain a middle position at the University of Paris between more radical Aristotelians and those who would give Aristotle no hearing at all.

This tendency to see all things integrally is particularly manifest in the mystical traditions of the Order. In fact, it is difficult to separate the intellectual and mystical traditions out from each other. Were Albert and Thomas mystics, philosophers, or theologians? Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327/28) was both preacher and teacher, both *Lebemeister* and *Lesemeister*. He, too, was professor, provincial, preacher and confessor. His genius for integration was especially present in his awareness of the inseparability of action and contemplation. All action must be contemplative action and all contemplation must overflow, or he would more likely say, boil over, into a sharing of the fruits of that contemplation, as Aquinas and the Dominican tradition emphasizes, both *contemplari and aliis tradere* (to contemplate and give to others the fruits of one's contemplation). This is why Eckhart saw in Martha a deeper spiritual integration than in the Mary of Luke's Gospel. One ought not oppose that which is intended to be one. There are not those who become pregnant and others who give birth as seems to be the image in a spirituality that defines action over against contemplation or contemplatives over against actives. The process is all of a piece. One cannot give birth without becoming pregnant and one becomes pregnant in order to give birth.

This same image of ‘birthing,’ so central to the mystical thought of Eckhart, is also central for Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). A person who claims to have conceived virtue within his or her soul but never shows that virtue in the service of others is, she says, like a woman who claims to be pregnant but never gives birth to a child. (*The Dialogue*, chap. 11). Following upon her call to leave the cell in her family home to which she had become accustomed in her love of God and affinity for a solitary life, Raymond of Capua (1330-1399) wrote that Christ spoke to her saying: ‘Remember that I laid down two commandments of love: love of me and love of your neighbour. On these two commandments, as I myself bore witness, “depend the whole Law and the Prophets” . . . . On two feet you must walk my way; on two wings you must fly to heaven’ (Raymond of Capua’s *Life of Catherine of Siena*, chap 121). Although there have been many unbalanced interpretations of Catherine’s life, and her life at times did reflect a deep challenge to remain integrated, her Dominican spirit is manifest in her awareness that God is both Truth and Love. She was both loyal to the papacy and open to challenging it. Her charity was both personal and political.

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We could proceed further and further into Dominican history and find more and more examples of this same pillar of Dominican spirituality. Was Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566) missionary or theologian, a defender of the rights of the indigenous or scholar? The thirst for justice is not separable from the thirst for truth, witness not separable from proclamation, solidarity with the poor not separable from solidarity with Christ, action on behalf of justice not separable from the evolution of a contemplative consciousness. Although some interpretations have seen Francisco de Vitoria (d. 1546) and the school of Salamanca as doing the theology and Las Casas as applying it, the more studied picture is that of Las Casas being a faithful and innovative theologian in his own right on behalf of the people he was called to serve. Heart and mind come together, and the Salamancans both taught and learned from Las Casas, for being both teacher and learner are not in opposition.

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One last example from our own times: Shigeto Oshida (1922-2003), a native Japanese Dominican friar, saw the challenge of our period of history as being one of integrating East and West, the thought of Asia and the spirituality of the West. Deeply Buddhist and faithfully Catholic, he saw both his Buddhism and his Catholicism as integral to each other. It was simply the Dominican tradition in theology and the spirit of Dominic to be able to embrace more widely by going more deeply.

#### THE GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP

It is more difficult to capture the essence of this pillar with just one word. I have chosen friendship, but fraternity and family also speak to

it, as does community – the value of relationship or kinship. Years ago when I heard about the four pillars and was young in the Order, I thought that a fifth pillar ought to be added to the other four, namely friendship. In many cases it seemed as if, when the going got tough, what held us together were our relationships, friendships, fraternity. And as I thought about it, this was noticeable in the tradition even if not so often explicitly mentioned.

We need only turn to the relationship between Dominic and Diego to find evidence of this early on. What relationship was forged between them as Diego chose Dominic to accompany him on those first journeys, what they talked about as they passed through Rome and travelled to the gathering with the Cistercian preachers, the significance for them of their co-founding the hospice/convent in Prouilhe, we will never know. That the Preaching emerged out of the relationship, of that we can be sure. But there was also the relationship between Dominic and Diana (d. 1236), not to mention the friendship between Diana and Jordan of Saxony (1190-1237), which correspondence shows the depth of their love for each other. There had also been the joyful planning of a never to be joint venture between Dominic and William of Montferrat, Jordan and Henry of Cologne's friendship, as well as that of Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua. These give us nothing of the unwritten relationships among the brethren or between the friars and sisters through the years.

Perhaps that is why it is not so strange today to speak of a Dominican Family as often as we do of a Dominican Order. The word 'family' gives emphasis to the spirit of kinship or relationship. It is not just about an individual, whether he or she be friar, nun, sister or lay. It is about a common project, a collaborative venture, and was so from the beginning. Catherine had her famiglia to which her extant extensive correspondence testifies. We are not simply preachers, not simply friars or sisters; we are family. Eckhart, Tauler and Suso had their 'Friends of God.' Where spiritual depth is present, relationships spring up. This is eminently true as we search through our roots at Prouilhe.

Prouilhe, we are discovering, was not just the work of Dominic, nor was it simply a monastery of nuns. There were the men and the women, converted Cathars, some of high standing, and Diego and Dominic's collaborators in the Preaching. There was yet no Order. But it took a family to make Prouilhe work – laity, married couples, women who would be nuns, men who would be friars. The names of those first women are often lost — Guilhelmine de Fanjeaux, Raimonde Claret, Alazaïs, Richarde de Barbaira, Guilhelmine de Belpech, Raimonde Passerine, Bérengère, Jourdain, Curtolane, Gentiane, and Ermessende.

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Note:  
Prouilhe in the south of France, was intimately associated with the beginnings of the Dominican Order. A community of Dominican nuns still exists there. Founded in 1206, the 800th anniversary is being celebrated currently throughout the Order ending at Advent 2007.

*...questions at the heart of Dominican spirituality.*

\* The island of Hispaniola, New Spain. The island is now shared by two states, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti.

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*Dominic's first love was truth.*

The spirit of Dominic was a relational spirit, a spirit of friendship, of brotherhood and sisterhood. What does it mean to be a brother to my brothers, a sister to my sisters, a brother to my sisters and a sister to my brothers? These are questions at the heart of Dominican spirituality. Granted characters, differences, idiosyncracies, there are the bonds, love and affection. Dominican spirituality is communal; the project a common one. Community is at the core of who we are; the common life essential. When Anton de Montesinos (d. 1530) delivered the first preaching of the friars (1511) in what to them was a new world,\* it was a communal preaching, to which the prior Pedro de Cordoba gave testimony when it was challenged. It was not Montesinos' sermon although he had been chosen by the community to deliver it.

This sense of friendship, fraternity, sisterhood, relationship, community undergirds the Dominican form of governance, what is often thought of as Dominic's genius. It was capitular in a new way, democratic, leadership elected with terms of office and not for life, a practice of dispensations that acknowledged and respected individuality while not focused upon it. We govern ourselves and in doing so place a great act of trust in one another. The conventual chapter, the provincial chapter, the general chapter were constitutive of a relational way of being religious in the world that was both traditional and innovative. In some ways the spirit of fraternity or familiarity was a natural outgrowth from the integrative character of Dominican life. It is integration on a different scale. It is also why the friars have often prized the fact that the Order had never split in the course of its history. Troubled yes, in need of reform yes, arguments over observances yes, but still all held together in the end in unity.

#### THE LOVE OF TRUTH

If there is one word that has accompanied the Dominican Order throughout the vagaries of its history, it is that of Veritas. In it everything is made clear. It is the deepest commitment, the light that elucidates. One can begin again with Dominic, whose abrupt exposure to the Cathars awakened him to a new world. Exemplified in the classic story of his all night disputation with the Cathar innkeeper in Toulouse, Dominic's first love was truth. It was this which led him along with Diego to propose a new style of preaching. The heretical church had taught them that the truth had to be lived as well as proclaimed. It was the truth in the Catholic tradition to which Dominic adhered while at the same time he was able to let go of all that made that truth less credible.

When Pope Innocent III concluded that the Holy Preaching was insufficient for combating heresy and declared a Holy War, one of the more brutal religious wars in history, the crusade against the Albigensians,

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Dominic never joined the crusade, to our knowledge never preached it, although one of the Cistercian preachers, Arnaud Amuary, had become its spiritual guide. Dominic continued with the preaching although he had befriended and was befriended by Simon de Montfort its leader. Dominic remained committed to the cause of truth, but did not embody every way of defending it. Dominic died in 1221. Ten years later, as it became apparent that the Holy War also would not succeed, Pope Gregory IX inaugurated the Holy Inquisition. The words seem ominous today, but at the time in its infancy and beginnings, one may not have noticed so strongly the difference between preaching, debate, and inquiring more deeply into the faith of someone, whether it was truly Catholic or not. It was understandable that the papacy often called upon the learned preachers to be inquisitors. But it was the same love of truth that led followers of Dominic to become so engaged.

I would suggest, however, that it was the angelic doctor Aquinas who more deeply understood that neither the holy preaching, a holy war, or a holy inquisition could undermine a deeply ingrained way of seeing the world that manifested the Manichean perspective from of old, which had also at one time captured the mind of St Augustine. It would rather take the Holy Teaching, *sacra doctrina*, to which the first article in his great *summa* was devoted. To establish the truth of the Catholic faith on a firmer foundation would require a more solid theology, especially theology of creation, which Aristotle could serve better than Plato, as much as he respected Plato and Augustine. Thomas's whole life was committed to the truth of the Catholic faith which meant also being observant of truth wherever he found it. All could be put at the service of the gospel of God, the truth that sets us free.

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You may recall the legend, centuries old, retold by Chesterton, about Thomas's being invited to a banquet hosted by the saintly King Louis IX, an unlikely habitat in which to find the angelic doctor. Evidently during the course of the meal not only was Thomas awakened from day dreaming but he alarmed others by pounding his fist on the table as he exclaimed, 'That should get the Manichees once and for all.' What was Thomas thinking at that moment if not that the natural philosophy of Aristotle would serve the Christian faith better and offer a theology that once and for all could undermine Catharism and affirm the goodness of God's creation?

Thomas had probably never met a Cathar. His own theology was an excellent response to Catharism, however. Thomas did not live in an ivory tower. He was more than aware of the politics of his day, of the struggles between emperor and popes. His family lived on the border between the papal states and the kingdom of Sicily and was involved in the conflicts between them. There were also the power struggles within

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the theology faculty in Paris between diocesan clergy and the new friars of which Thomas was intimately a part. There were the conflicts with the Aristotelians and his contact with Muslim learning. Thomas by no means lived in a narrow world. Within that world and among those conflicts, however, Thomas remained a seeker. His pursuit of truth was equally well reflected in his decision later in life to discontinue writing, not that what he had written was unworthy but that he now himself had come closer to Truth inexpressible: ‘Everything I have written seems to me so much straw compared with what I have seen.’

I no longer know who said (it could even have been Augustine), *Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas* (I love Plato, but I love truth more), but it captures something in the soul of the Dominican spirit: the unquenchable thirst for truth. As odd as it may seem, it is that love, that first love of Dominic himself, that places the Order both in *medio ecclesiae* (at the centre of the Church) and at times at odds with ecclesial authority. The highest authority is truth itself, Truth Itself, Catherine of Siena’s *la prima dolce Verità*. Thomas, Eckhart, Catherine, in their commitment to what they knew to be true, while also docile to the teaching of the Church, nevertheless felt drawn to take that teaching further or to challenge the boundaries within which it was being constrained. Truth is what unites us; yet our quest for it is also what at times divides us.

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#### THE GRACE OF FREEDOM

This final pillar of Dominican life and spirituality is that of a freedom grounded in a theology of grace. It is difficult to say whether the better word here is freedom or grace. Dominic came to be known as *praedicator gratiae* (preacher of grace). Aquinas articulated a theology of grace that maintained the delicate balance between a pelagianism that failed to do justice to grace, which allowed too much space for something other than grace, and a doctrine that would become known as *sola gratia* among the Reformers, which failed to do justice to human freedom and human nature. With Aquinas it was a question of both grace and nature, both divine grace and human freedom. Grace perfects nature. They are not in opposition to each other. This also manifests the spirit of integration that sees non-contradiction in what other minds might put asunder.

*Grace and nature are not in opposition to each other.*

A Dominican (Thomistic) theology of grace does not see human nature, and therefore human freedom, in contradiction to grace. It is all grace, yet grace understood as not destroying freedom but enhancing it. We are free because of grace and not in spite of it. It is grace that makes us free. Grace does not work against nature but rather in harmony with it. Grace helps to make us who we truly are. It is co-natural

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rather than anti-natural.

Human freedom does not have to be rescued from divine grace, for they manifest two different orders or levels of causality that are not in opposition. The first cause causes the causality of secondary causes without interfering in the true causality of the secondary cause. Divine and human action are not exclusive of each other, not in opposition to each other. God acts within us according to our nature as free beings. God's causality causes us to act freely. Thomas's theology of grace minimizes neither the role of grace nor the role of human freedom. To negate our freedom is to do a disservice to our Creator. Although we cannot here go into the nuances of Aquinas's theology of grace and the controversies that ensued in later centuries, we can appreciate how important that theology is within Dominican life itself. Aquinas understood freedom as a human reality valued by God.

This graced freedom is not to be seen as the same as choice. In the Anglo-American traditions we often see freedom as synonymous with free choice. The more choices we have, the freer we are, but having more choices doesn't necessarily make us more free. The tradition rather sees freedom as a capacity to do good, as the power to serve. This is why, for a Dominican, freedom is not sacrificed in the vow of obedience.

Followers of Dominic only profess one vow, that of obedience, for all the rest is contained therein. This is not a blind obedience (which does a disservice to a Dominican appreciation of rationality), nor a servile obedience (based on an authoritarian style of government) but rather a fraternal obedience cognizant of brotherhood and sisterhood, an obedience that is at the service of truth. Within the vow of obedience, we vow ourselves to freedom. It is the vow of obedience that allows, sustains, both the unity and the diversity of the Order. We are one and so we need not fear being ourselves. Obedience allows us the luxury of not fearing disintegration. It frees us to be present to God's Word and to allow God's Word to be spoken through us. Our unity and diversity need not be in tension with each other. They set us free, free to think, for the sake of truth, for the sake of the gospel, in a collaborative way, integrating into a deep harmony what otherwise remains disparate and weakened. The vow of obedience is a pledge to remain open and receptive to grace, a supreme manifestation of which is true inner freedom.

These four pillars of Dominican life – integration, friendship, truth, and freedom – help us to appreciate who Dominic's followers are called to be within the Church and what the charism of Dominic is all about: an integrating, free, and fraternal commitment to Truth.