**Dominican Sisters Conference**

Elise D. García, OP

October 4, 2015

**Matthew 28:16-20** (New American Bible)

*The elevendisciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them. When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted. Then Jesus approached and said to them, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore,and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”*

These last words in the Gospel of Matthew comprise the Great Commissioning of the Apostles. The instructions to carry on the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus … to share the good news of God’s love and abiding presence among us. Jesus is Emmanuel … the divine presence ... Shekinah.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is this Great Commission to preach the good news that is at the foundation and heart of Dominican life.

What Dominic sought and obtained from the Pope 800 years ago was not the approval of a Dominican Rule. “But,” as Simon Tugwell writes in *The Way of the Preacher*, “confirmation of the outrageous novelty of his brethren forming an *order of preachers.*”[[2]](#footnote-2)

It was an outrageous novelty, as we know, on at least two counts:

First, the Church of the 12th century reserved only to bishops the privilege of preaching.

Second, Dominic proposed a religious life based on “a totally different model, a different myth,”[[3]](#footnote-3) Tugwell writes. Monastic life was built on the model of the common life of the first Christians in Jerusalem. Dominic instead offers the model of “Christ, wandering round with nowhere to lay his head,” sending out his followers to proclaim the good news, relying on whatever hospitality might be offered.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As Dominican women in the 21st century, we cannot fail to notice Tugwell’s characterization of the outrageous novelty of Dominic’s *brethren* forming an order of preachers.

What about the women? Where did *they* – where do *we* – fit in?

As we heard from our foremothers at Prouille, there was a crisis in the early years of the Order over whether to keep the nuns. And, as Lady Raimonde reminded us, “The Sisters fought back.”

Over our 800-year history to the present day, patriarchy in Church and society has forced Dominican women to carve out our role as preachers. It was not given to us as it was to our brethren when Dominic received the papal approbation for the Order.

But the struggle against constraints that have limited the sphere of women’s lives has led to great creativity and ways of preaching that, providentially, are uniquely suited to the extraordinary challenges we face today. If we look at our deep story as Dominican women, we can see gifts that we have “stirred into flame,” as Paul writes to Timothy. I’ll mention four.

As we know, the first Dominicans were women. But not just any women. Our foremothers at Prouille became Dominicans as a result of a *conversion* *experience*. Their entire worldview was changed – thanks to their spiritual engagement with a loving, joy-filled preacher. Our story begins with a conversion experience.

As converts, the women came together at a particular *place* – a place in southern France where their communal life became a witness to the Holy Preaching. Itinerancy was not an option. Over the ensuing centuries, hundreds of other places became sites of the Holy Preaching as Dominican women established cloisters and communities around the world.

On a parallel track, women who felt called to the Dominican charism but not to the cloistered life struggled to break out of its confines. Catherine of Siena, of course, is the exemplar among them. In Catherine we see a Dominican woman preaching not only to bishops and Popes but to the entire world, teaching and exemplifying the foundational truth that love of God and love of neighbor are one love. Through Catherine and her descendants, *service toward neighbor* became a part of the Holy Preaching, finding expression in tens of thousands of Dominican women who have preached the goodness and presence of God with their lives.

In our time, a profound call at Vatican II “to study the sources of all Christian life” and the “original inspiration” behind our congregations was accompanied by a mandate to “adjust” our communities “to the changed conditions of the times.”[[5]](#footnote-5) As we know, no one took this call more seriously than women religious; and among Dominican women, the call led to a dramatic *expansion of the Holy Preaching* out to the margins of Church and society.

And that brings us to this moment. We live at a time when human ingenuity and blindness are combining to chart a deadly course that will have catastrophic consequences for all life on our planet, if not averted.

In *the way of the preacher* that has emerged among Dominican women over the past eight centuries is a path that points to a preferred future. What is needed at this time and what has grown in and through us as Dominican women comes to a convergence.

First and foremost, we know that what is needed is a profound conversion of hearts and minds and lifestyles. Our deep story as Dominican women begins with a conversion experience: Conversion, arguably, is in our preaching DNA. Let us deepen our own conversion, move beyond our places of comfort and, as loving, joy-filled preachers, share the good news of divine creation and the inherent dignity of all people in pressing for urgent action for the common good of the whole Earth community.

Second, models are needed. In our communal lives over the centuries, we have sustained the power and presence of place. We have land and buildings that can become witnesses of the Holy Preaching needed today – offering sanctuary and demonstrating the way to a sustainable future with solar panels, rain catchment systems, organic gardens.

Third, the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor must both be attended. We have years of experience ministering on the frontlines in response to society’s critical needs. As our conversations these past days illustrate, Dominican women know in our bones whereof Pope Francis speaks when he talks about “integral ecology.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Further, while we are fewer in number, those who have been called to this Dominican life in recent years to the present day are much larger in cultural, racial, age, and ethnic diversity, bringing these great gifts of the Spirit – with their critical challenges – to the Holy Preaching. Dominican Women Afire help us all to ever more intentionally, ever more audaciously and oxidizingly, make the connections.

And finally, a more expansive vision is needed. Our rigorous study – of social issues, science, theology, the new cosmology – combined with a renewed appreciation of the power of communal contemplation invites us to enter into the depths of our tradition as vowed Dominicans in a new context, the context of an emerging universe. As we contemplate God’s immense universe with its billions of galaxies, all expanding at vast speeds as we speak, we enter, paradoxically, into the still point of Mystery. Let us speak, let us preach, from that Still Point.

During his visit with us last week, our Jesuit brother Francis demonstrated over and over again the power of gesture. The power of the Pope’s gesture was directly proportional to its authenticity in him.

During the past 800 years, Dominican women have found many ways to preach in word and deed, authentically, with our lives. Let us now bring the power of gesture fully to bear, going forth to preach with our Dominican lives – *as if all life depends on it.*

1. The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 674 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Simon Tugwell, OP, *The Way of the Preacher* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate Publishers, 1979), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Perfectae Caritatis* (Chapter 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Laudato Si’*, Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)