

Irenej Maroš FINTOR

The Role of Study in the Dominican Tradition

The Dominican tradition continues the line of ancient Judeo-Christian spiritual traditions. Simultaneously it attempts to combine them with its own original impeti. In its beginnings it formed a synthesis of the ancient spiritual traditions and the spirit of the age in which it was born. This synthesis proved to be so supertemporal that from the XIIIth century up until now it has continually inspired individuals to explore and further it. However, in order to see its focus more clearly it is necessary to look back and see what preceded it.

THE JEWISH AND EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS OF STUDY

Israel is often referred to as the *nation of the Book* and the book of the Torah is for the Jewish believer a unique gift of God. It is a means of creating a special relationship between God and Israel as the people of God. In the Torah God reveals Godself to Israel.

But in order to remain true to the Covenant and God, Israel is invited to continually learn about and discover God not only in prayer and daily life, but also through the study of the Torah. And so alongside charity works, liturgy and prayer, the study of the Torah has become an important religious act that connects the Jewish believer with the event of the Exodus and the revelation on Mount Sinai and actualizes them.

The importance of the study of the Torah gradually gained more ground and especially in the Rabbinic tradition played a constitutive role. Among the Rabbis the study of the Torah did not have just an informative aspect but also a mystical one. The study created space for the experience of the sacred; space for experiencing God's presence—*Shekinah*.

According to the teaching of the Rabbis, when someone studies the Torah, God's presence becomes revealed and is immediately present in the study in the same way as it is present in the sanctuary, only this time it needs no building and no ritual.

The Jewish tradition of study naturally echoed also in the early Christian communities. God's sanctity, wisdom and self-revelation—that for the Jews were contained in the Torah—became from the Christian perspective embodied in Jesus Christ. As the proclamation of Christ's message was in the early Church still connected to people who had the unique first-hand experience of God's self-revelation in the historical Jesus, Christian literature contained from its very beginning an essential relational dimension.

Study played an even more specific role in the monastic tradition, where the reading of God's word was combined with prayer and became basic spiritual nourishment, a time for listening to God. The study of the Scriptures was later supplemented by the study of Church Fathers and other spiritual authors. The aim was not to diminish the authority of the Scriptures, but rather to enrich the knowledge and relational potential towards God and people on the part of the monks. Interestingly enough, this type of study was in the monastic tradition placed in a special framework—the framework of asceticism.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ST. DOMINIC

Dominic Guzman—the founder of the Dominican Order—availed himself of the aforementioned traditions; while on the other hand he attempted to create an original synthesis tailored to his time. In order to understand better the essence of Dominic's contribution, it is important to mention at least some of the circumstances of the given historical era.

In the early XIIIth century the Augustinian canon Dominic Guzman, together with the bishop Diego of Osma, were passing through South France, where the movements of the Cathars and the Albigenses were expanding. The efforts of the papal legates to solve the situation and reach reconciliation proved to be a failure and a war broke out. Dominic and Diego, however, saw a potential solution to the situation in a revival of apostolic life – in the form of travelling preachers, since this was the way the new spiritual movements operated.

However, what they saw being neglected by the travelling preachers was intellectual formation, which resulted in various excesses. Therefore, if Diego and Dominic were to initiate dialogue with the preachers of spiritual purity, they needed preachers with appropriate intellectual preparation. In this way the requirement of study for the sake of the salvation of souls became a constitutive condition for the formation of a preacher. It became such an obvious emphasis that study replaced manual work that had been until then an indispensable part of monastic life.

By 1214 a small group of collaborators gathered around Dominic. In 1215 they received from bishop Fulk of Toulouse the permission to preach; a right that was in those times reserved solely to bishops. The bishop even provided them with funds for food and books. The brothers soon erected a monastery adapted to the purpose of study.

On December 12, 1216, Dominic received from the Pope Honorius III an official authorisation of the order and thus his brothers became independent of the diocese. Being aware of the importance of spiritual and intellectual formation, in 1217 Dominic sent the first brothers to the major university cities of his time – Paris and Bologna.

The inner life of the monasteries was set by the Constitutions, approved in 1220, whose key focus was prayer and study for the sake of the salvation of souls. Therefore, from the very beginnings of the Dominican tradition, study had a central position in the life of the brothers, although it was not regarded as separate from other crucial commitments of theirs.

STUDY IN THE DOMINICAN TRADITION

The most complex and most widely used concept of study in the Dominican tradition is the one elaborated by Thomas AQUINAS in his *Summa theologiae*. In many aspects his ideas proved to be supertemporal and were further elaborated by the later authorities of the Order. At times they needed adjustment to changing circumstances, but on the whole there is an obvious continuity in their interpretation in the framework of the Dominican charisma.

The step which can be seen as epochal is linked to Thomas' view of the gnozeologic process. This was embed-



ded in the Aristotelian structures and contemporary academic discourse and led Thomas to the thesis that study is a human act that in itself is morally indifferent.

Why is this thesis important? Although AQUINAS admitted that the process of determining the object of cognition, the analysis of reception mechanisms and the creation and classification of concepts has its intrinsic value, he also recognized that not every form of study necessarily leads to a greater love for God, as was often maintained in the early Christian tradition in connection with the *lectio divina* and the study of the Church Fathers.

On the other hand AQUINAS – as a man of faith and monastic formation – realized that such an “autonomistic” understanding of study is possible only at the abstract level. In real life study is always part of the moral life of the individual that either strives for growth in virtues and the good or in negative life attitudes and partial satisfaction of the self.

And so, apart from defining the process of study as morally indifferent, Thomas AQUINAS insisted on the necessity to cultivate study in a relationship with God, who is the fullness and goal that the human strives for. In this context St. Thomas presented three chief reasons for study – contemplation, preaching or instruction, and growth in personal maturity.

CONTEMPLATION

The relation between prayer and study has been mentioned already in the paragraph on early Christian and monastic traditions. This relation constitutes an important basis for the concept of contemplation in the Dominican tradition. The link between these realities is in AQUINAS synthesized through the concept of *Veritas* (Truth).

Through study the human acquires “an insight into the truth about things.” It is a time when the human opens her- or himself to truth. She or he makes an effort to perceive the truth about things, relations, values or concepts. This truth about things prevents us from getting lost in conjectures, imaginations and stories.

As the things around us are understandable, the human does not have to be reliant on a confabulated explanation of events, circumstances, relations and phenomena. Through study—and thus through an insight into the truth about things—the human acquires the awareness that she or he is not in the middle of a space that is beyond her or his influence and out of reach.

Similarly, prayer should be based on the solid ground of study. Spiritual life cannot be reduced to personal enlightenment, individual inspiration and emotional experiences, although these are also important parts of it. This is one of the reasons why the Dominican tradition always emphasized that spiritual formation and prayer need to contain a deep Biblical and theological dimension.

A balance of emotional and rational emphases in prayer prevents either of the extremes. Such a prayer is then a time when human lets her- or himself be permeated by Truth-God. In this way prayer is not an opportunity to gather merits, but a space and time of an encounter with God when God talks to the human through the Scripture or theology. Prayer becomes a mode of listening and encountering.

Veritas—as the aim of study and prayer—becomes a unifying force that one experiences in contemplation. AQUINAS defined contemplation as “a simple insight into truth.” Inevitably contemplation becomes linked to the *metanoia* of the individual.

The aim of contemplation is not to see oneself as the

centre of things that are perceived rationally and emotionally. If this were the primary focus, the human would have to perceive her- or himself with all her/his limitations, passions and failures, and would need to sink into despondency.

In contemplation, however, the human on the basis of study and prayer, lets her/his intellect and heart be filled with truth and love. In this way the human can grow in the familiarity with God and experience a gradual unification with God. Such a view of God’s truthfulness, beauty and love empowers the human and prompts her/him to embrace discipleship.

In contemplation the human opens up and step-by-step learns to see the world with God’s eyes. Therefore true contemplation cannot be a flight from the neighbour and the world. On the contrary, inspired by God’s affection to humankind and the world, the individual is prompted to create deeper relationships and to intensify her/his involvement in the world.

PREACHING IN ITS VARIOUS FORMS

The Dominican Order was founded according to its Constitutions for the purpose of mediating to the believers the fruits of contemplation—thence the parole *contemplata aliis tradere*. When St. Thomas elaborates on styles of life, he touches upon the two boundary modes—contemplation and action. He claims that there are people who, without much regret, abandon contemplation in order to immerse themselves in the stream of life. This he denotes, however, as imperfect love.

Others, on the other hand, do not want to part from contemplation at any price. And even though AQUINAS sees contemplation as qualitatively more valuable than mere action, he points out that true friendship is practiced when the contemplation of God is given up in order to serve God in the active care of souls.

Thus contemplation, although truly crucial, is not the ultimate aim of the life of a Dominican. It is a means that serves the aim of the Order which is preaching for the sake of the salvation of souls. Similarly, prayer and study do not have their aim within themselves. They should lead the individual to wisdom that teaches the human to see God’s mercy, compassion and solidarity.

This approach enables the human to cultivate sensitivity to the worries and problems of her/his neighbours and she/he realizes that the service of truth and intellect go hand in hand with the service of justice, compassion and solidarity in the world. This wisdom contemplated in God and revealed in interpersonal relationships and the world can be practiced in manifold ways. The key way for the Dominican is preaching.

The term *preaching* denotes *stricto sensu* the passing on of knowledge, mediation of the mysteries of life and faith to others. This sort of preaching is closely linked to the spoken word of the liturgy, but can also take place in other ways, formal and informal. Often it is embodied in the written word too.

But the concept of *preaching* in the Dominican tradition has a broader meaning. Study and prayer enable the individual to perceive human crises, problems and sufferings in a deeper way which leads the preacher to compassion and solidarity that is not necessarily expressed verbally. It can at times be more efficiently expressed in social involvement or simply in a responsible fulfilment of one’s life tasks as the most powerful witness about one’s sincere faith.

The words of prayer of intercession for those in need are



yet another mode of preaching for the sake of the salvation of souls. Therefore it is not only the brothers who partake in the preaching charisma of the Dominican Order, but also the contemplative nuns, congregations of sisters and many lay Dominicans living in families and working in public life.

PERSONAL MATURITY AND THE VIRTUE OF STUDIOSITAS

Study is in the Dominican tradition also a way of personal growing-up. AQUINAS emphasized this aspect by highlighting in his doctrine the virtue of *studiositas*. He coupled this virtue with one of the main virtues, namely the one of temperance. In this way he tried to create a holistic approach to the perception of humankind.

Since nothing can be fully separated from other parts of the whole, every virtue is to be seen in the context of other qualities of the human. Therefore also the virtue of *studiositas*, if cultivated earnestly, contributes to the growth and perfection of the entire personality. In what ways does *studiositas* enrich the personality?

Firstly, assiduous and consistent study requires self-discipline. One has to sit down, state her/his priorities and

structure her/his time accordingly in order to adequately channel her/his efforts. Such a distribution of time requires the incorporation of study into the context of other requirements of life, creating a daily framework for study and an environment that supports study.

At the thematic level study should be aimed at personal growth of oneself and others, realizing that study is not its own aim, but an attempt to find answers to problems and issues of a chosen area. Its focus is the improvement and perfection of things, relationships and the furthering of the inner growth of people. As a result this requires a parallel development of other personal qualities of *the student*.

The second dimension of study is to create space for an encounter. Namely, as it was already considered in the Judeo-Christian tradition, study is not only about the amassing of information, but above all about the integration of information in the studying subject. It needs to create space for the encounter with oneself and with God.

Only in such a space is the human able to experience a certain form of *metanoia* through study. Transcending one's own limitations both at the level of intellect and emotions makes it possible for the human to become increasingly mature as a personality.

Consequently, study as a *space for encounter* pre-supposes the opening of the human for a relationship. In a relationship the human becomes conscious of her- or himself and the other. In a relationship information is not merely a technical means but an existential communication. In a relationship both of the essential dimensions of contemplation are practiced. The active dimension concerns the acquisition of knowledge, relationships; it is the penetration of things in their depth. The other dimension is an active approach to the creation of silence. Silence is the space for listening; an attempt to detect and understand voices that reach the human both from the depths of her/his own soul and from outside.

In this way silence opens the human to both God and people; it becomes a vital part of dialogue. Learning to listen to others is the education of the mind. In every human there is some spiritual egoism that needs to be mastered and educated. The opening of the mind to unexpected insights and new relationships requires therefore inner asceticism that teaches the human to be present *here and now*, ready for a thought, a human, a relationship. If this integrative approach is applied with full earnestness, study can become an important helping instrument in the development of communication and in the reinforcement of community.

Suggested Reading

- AQUINAS Thomas, *Summa Theologica*. Westminster, 1981.
 AUMANN Jordan, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*. London, 2005.
 ENGEL Ulrich, *Dominikanische Spiritualität*. Leipzig, 2000.
 RADCLIFFE Timothy, *Sing a New Song. The Christian Vocation*. Dublin, 2000.
 WOODS Richard, *Mysticism and Prophecy. The Dominican Tradition*. London, 1998.

Irenej Maroš FINTOR OP was born in 1978 in Krupina, Slovakia. He is currently finishing his theological studies at the Ružomberok Catholic University in Košice. He took part in study programmes in Cork, Ireland, and Fribourg, Switzerland, and is an active member of Ekunet (Slovakia SCM). He has participated in a number of WSCF events, as well as in national ecumenical activities in Slovakia.

