

Dominican Conference: Contemplation – Radical Being

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When I realized I would be needing to bring together the threads of our weekend I realized I certainly should not have said ‘yes’ to being here!

We choose to live with the tension of a not-yet redeemed world because Christ meets us here in this very place and time, as the locus of communion on behalf of others. Always on behalf of others. We heard this from Fr Terry Brady yesterday afternoon. The Samaritan, the outsider, revealed God’s tender presence and healing to the one collapsed by the roadside, overlooked, unattended. Our Dominican legacy provides us with the tools to reflect, critique and attend to these gap experiences for ourselves and our learners. These are the teachable moments of our lives.

Thankfully our God is always persistent, always luring and curing us. It has not been so difficult to recognize God’s pervasive presence this weekend in the multifarious ways we have engaged, discussed, been given nourishment, bodily and spiritual, offered intellectual and emotional challenges, peer affirmation and support, exchanged our sacred stories, and shared in the unfolding dream of Dominic, always, always in Christ.

Two beautiful young women, Jo Garsia and Karla Nadar, ex students of Santa Sabina shared in their workshop yesterday how their lives have traversed liminal places, strengthened and supported by the Dominican formation they have received, that has fit, and shaped and shaken them for life. Theirs was an amazing story embracing change, courage, taking risks that moved them beyond their comfort zones, and their heart-stretching, compassionate responses to be the very best they can be for our world. They were not afraid to leave us with challenges as educators, nor to name their struggles. This is God’s loving disclosure, choosing to co-create with us a different world order.

All of us are blessed by Jo and Karla’s choices not for success, but significance. One quote they referred to was that everything can be cured by water: sweat, tears and salt. A good combination for Dominicans: sweat: the discipline to stay the course with courage; tears: liquid compassion for our world’s sorrows (Dominic shed many); and salt: the passion that

gives us our flavour, of lives broken open by the Word that fulfills all our longings and mends our world. Jo and Karla provided us with a window of God's grace. A reflection of hope for our future. God's shining in them.

Lord, how can we preach thy eternal word?
We are brittle crazy glass:
Yet in thy temple thou dost us afford
This glorious and transcendent place,
To be a window, through thy grace.
George Herbert

There were other windows. What met us each day were the countless networks of relationships and service that provided us with ongoing hospitality throughout, great food, endless cups of coffee or tea, rooms always prepared with whatever was needed, IT support, Dominique's wonderful organization from way back then, till now, flower power, stalls for us to shop till we dropped, the countless hands that made all of this possible from the students, helpers, supporters, music makers and kingdom makers.

Further windows were opened by the input provided over the three days.

I spoke of Mary, the first disciple, who, by her 'yes' offered us in Christ the hope that our world can become a more human, more tender place, a place of right relationship to which we are all called. Even as we have celebrated with joyous gusto - for us Dominicans are good at this - we remember the one who attends the gap, walks to the edges. [Joan Sauro poem.] We remember her. We remember her. We stand here in prayer for our wider world, to be present to all the injuries and suffering that continue to haunt our world, the world Dominic wept for and we continue to respond to.

Duncan MacLaren spoke of his personal journey as a Dominican within the context of community and work, which expresses itself by putting on truth and heeding the call to just action. Not only to know **what** is true, but also **why** it is true. Duncan enquired what this might mean for our educational institutions, He used Matisse's line drawing of Dominic to challenge us to fill out the charism by the way we live our lives. Duncan reminded us that our study should be a discipline of truthfulness that opens the eyes, accompanied by lobbying to change those structures that keep people poor. He believes that prayer/contemplation and

study **lead us to justice** and to the **heart of human dignity**. Duncan challenged us to **talk truth to power**. Directing his last comments to education, Duncan cautioned that study is not learning how to be clever but **how to listen** and respond.

Wonderful offerings occurred – may I invite different people who attended the various workshops to sum up in one or two sentences how these experiences shaped them, to give feedback this morning?

Dr. Amanda Bell provided provocative input on the Lost Art of Scholarship. She disabused the notion of scholarship being the provenance of the gifted, noting the common flaw in the theory, stating that scholarship is for everyone, creating qualities of engagement in the continuum of learning, where curiosity, application, tenacity are part of the endeavour. ‘What is the basis of good teaching and learning?’ Dr. Bell asked, ‘Scholarship.’ Scholarship that is both rigorous and referenced. By her own admission she did not hold weight or patience with the notion that everyone in a school is a leader.

Dr. Bell maintained that you lead by example, as role model and mentor, having the confidence to know that you are within a scholarly realm, that you write and speak about it, have the ability to know what you don’t know, asking good questions and making good judgments, being self-critical. To this end Dr. Bell strongly recommended developing research and scholarship amongst the teachers, developing peer support and critique in an every widening arena within the school structure on a regularly, planned basis. She maintained that we may not ask of our students what we are not prepared to do ourselves.

Some further challenges presented to us included demythologizing and utilizing digital communication systems over and above its common social networking usage. It has come of age and we need to engage with this technology.

Dr. Bell concluded by saying that educational change and reform are necessary, and how the traditional field of scholarship can be a catalyst for such change.

After the morning coffee break we were treated to a cornucopia of experience and passion on the Dominican charism and how it manifests itself in our school structures.

This unfolded in the first context through **Deborah Bell's** presentation on '**The Sacred Everlasting Spring – the Charism in a time of Great Turning**'. Deborah cited a voice outside the mainstream, Anodeo Judith, to amplify how the power structures of the world are beginning to crumble alongside the heart's awakening, calling each of us to a better way of loving, in a time of great possibility. We respond to this invitation.

Deborah went on to say that there is more power in the hands of the individual now than in any other time in history, that such power can address the needs of our day and speak on behalf of those who have no voice. One encouraging sign of hope is, she said, the placing of financial resources in conscience-based investments. Not the corporate financial barons but ordinary folk are committing to this form of practice. Deborah maintains that this cannot happen when people are in the survival mode, that the current social circumstances allows us to build the Kingdom not next year, but here and now, that the love of power is shifting to the power of love, this vision of community within the context of the charism.

Deborah expressed how influential Cardinal Suenens has been in relation to the laity and the charism in the Catholic domain. She then confidently mapped out progress in the understanding of and application of charism through the developments and implementation of the Second Vatican Council, and the contributions of Pope John XXIII (A New Pentecost) and Pope Paul VI. That charism is given for a purpose, a benefit for building up, given and broadly disseminated among the faithful (differing from talents).

Such was Cardinal Suenens influence that, Deborah said, he fought for the chapter on the Laity to come before the Constitution on the church. Pope Paul VI would speak that our hearts are awakening to truth and to divine love. Deborah highlighted the urgency for renewal in our time. Vatican II had a great impact on mission, the apostolate and contemplation, including the apostolate of the school, linking the understanding of charism to Catholic identity.

Deborah cautioned us to not lose sight of this deep story of the mystery of the Incarnation we have entered into, and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This elicited questions of how we evolve our own conscience with authenticity to the influence of the Divine evolutionary vision, centred upon radical community, breaking down hierarchical structures.

Deborah spoke to the need to enhance our communal understanding of the charism that we discover from living and relating to each other, communicating insights as a Dominican community, exploring what this means together. Shalom, peace, justice, empowerment, healing, community, unity are the concrete signs, each day, she said. A faith that leads us on to reach what we hope to make visible, the presence of Christ in the world. The rest, she said, is negotiable.

Margaret Lee: Living and learning with the Dominican Charism

Margaret Lee followed on with her presentation on living and learning together as experienced and practiced at San Sisto, seamlessly integrating the Dominican charism and Catholic ethos, referenced by the comments students made in interviews, their voice sounding loudly in the exploration of what this means for them. In summary, living the Dominican charism is all about relationships, she said.

Margaret gave a very cogent pedagogical framework around how the charism permeates every aspect of the school's life, every day, forging both students and teachers into a fulcrum of Christian identity. One of the pivotal methods used to enhance this philosophy is Habits of Spirit which Margaret said, seeks connectedness to God and one another at our deepest core.

This input gave credence to the passion with which San Sisto students and teachers embrace a way of being in our world that is effective, relational and prophetic, as well as organic, in process, open to future possibilities. The depth of intellectual integrity and application of the framework ensure that students reach their fullest potential as Christians through the prism of the Dominican charism.

So we have had many windows opened, many threads and challenges drawn together to feed us for our journey, friends to accompany us in these endeavours. Being charged to carry this dream put me in mind of some lines by the Scottish poet, Kathleen Raine:

Threading my way, devious in its weaving
Into the web of the world,
Time's warp running from far back, and on
Of lives, crossed life-lines, intercrossed, entangled,

Knotted, knitted together, ravelled, unravelled,
Hidden, re-emerging in new design,
Always growing, unseen or seen
Patterns we make with one another, distant
Or near, from immemorial past
Into unbounded future running unbroken,
Threads so fine and subtle of lives
We weave and interweave, slender as light,
Intangible substance of the age-old
Ever-extending all, makers and made
Who feel the pull of love, of grief, on every thread.

We have been exploring the dream that propelled Dominic out with passion on a journey that has encompassed centuries of like dreamers, pulling all the threads together. Within the tradition of contemplation lies our capacity for wonder and potency, a place where the core life inside us and the world around us can coalesce and make a bid for perfect harmony, rhythm to the beat of God. We made it yesterday with the drums! However, such a dream exacts a radical return. Are we up to it? Mary Coleridge in her tiny poem *Salus Mundi* would warn:

The safety of the world was lying there, (in the manger)
And the world's danger.

Being truly alive effects this radical change, at a cost, else how would we be that point of radiation that Dominic represents? Perhaps it is a bit like the pre-digital era of the camera: exploring the territory of vision, choosing the right lens, the right perspective, discernment determining what remains, what we let go of. We bring our passion into it because it requires all of our intellect, as well as all the nuances of intuition to find the right solution, the right light, to reframe problems into opportunities. We need the ongoing search for truth, understanding of knowledge and information to guide us (study, scholarship, technique – Amanda Bell, Margaret); and as we honour the complexity we let the light in, the light of faith, the heart of compassion (behaviours that speak to heart, the charism – Duncan, Deborah, Margaret). Our actions and practice become congruent with our vision. It is all about focus, and with focus comes transformation.

We began with the dream and we end with it in the sure knowledge that we can imagine a better world, because we pledge ourselves into it as Dominicans, radiant with the light of Christ. Together we can make a difference.