Reflection for the Feast of all Dominican Saints – 7th November 2015

Today, the 7th of November – is the feasts of all Dominican Saints. From today, throughout the world the Dominican Family begins a year of jubilee marking the 800th anniversary of the founding of the Order of Preachers by St. Dominic. We have come together to celebrate because we too belong, through various associations, to the Dominican Family, part of a vast tree which was planted over 800 years ago. Here in New Zealand we could liken it to our majestic Kauri, but in the Manawatu we would probably be happy with our mighty Totara.

The reading we have just listened to from Luke about the commissioning of the 72 disciples by Jesus suitably illustrates two of the four key aspects of Dominican spirituality: community and mission. Other parts of Luke show the importance of the other two key aspects: prayer and study. In chapter 6: 12, before appointing his 12 apostles, Jesus spent “the whole night in prayer…” We also know that from an early age study was important for Jesus when in chapter 2: 46 – 47, his parents found him “in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions”.

Perhaps today’s somewhat dramatic reading, can take us back a little to our own experiences of the community support and mission aspects of Dominican life. We can reflect on when we started off on our careers: Was there much to take for our journeys then? What experiences did we have of being like “lambs among wolves”? And who were the various people who were like a community supporting us along the way, and some travelling with us at different stages as we went out? No doubt among us here, there have been many different journeys such as farming, teaching, nursing, parenthood, office work, any one of the vast diversity of occupations and vocations which open up to us along the way.

When I started out on my journey into the Deaf community in 1980 as I began training for the Marist priesthood at Mount St. Mary’s in Greenmeadows Napier, it was the ex-pupils of St. Dominic’s, the Dominican Sisters, the local Deaf in Hawke’s Bay, and my Marist confreres, who became my community for mission. At that time, I was not aware of the profound effect the Dominican spirit was to have on shaping my journey over the years. This spirit of community and mission was first instilled by St. Dominic. Not long after Pope Honorius III confirmed the Dominican order in 1216, Dominic, on the feast of the Assumption, broke up his band of friars and sent them out in all directions. Like the gospel passage, Dominic saw that God’s mission was ‘urgent’; an opportunity to go out, make a difference, do something good.

Here in New Zealand we can trace our Dominican history to Sion Hill in south Dublin and Cabra in the north. However the first known Dominican to reach New Zealand’s shores was a French Dominican friar from Paris, who arrived in Doubtless Bay in Northland on a French merchant vessel (as the ship’s chaplain) in 1769. It was to be over 100 years later before the next Dominicans came on the s.s. Gothenburg from Melbourne, carrying: Bishop Patrick Moran, Fr. Coleman, and 10 Dominican Sisters from Sion Hill, of which Sr. Mary Gabriel Gill OP was to be the first Superior.

It arrived at Bluff on the 16th of February 1871 and berthed one night. Anthony Trollope, a year later, described Bluff – “it had a quay, and a railway, a post office, and two inns; - but nothing else – more like the western sea-coast of County Cork than any other that I have seen.” On the morning of the 18th February they reached Port Chalmers. Like the early Dominicans, many of the emigrant Catholics to arrive in New Zealand also came from Ireland, sometimes directly, or through Australia. My father’s ancestor: Hugh and Margaret Molloy (and 3 children) arrived in Bluff 7 years before the Sisters in January 1864 having left Offaly in Ireland in December 1863. They eventually settled in the Gummies Bush area north of Riverton.

A big part of Dominican life is of course ‘education’, and this term can be understood in its broadest sense, covering human experience from birth to death. Many here today can attest not only to the fine schooling we received through the Dominicans in New Zealand, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to the thirst for learning, the pursuit of excellence, and the well-rounded Christian living, which our education instilled in us. The very same values of prayer, study, community, and mission which St. Dominic imparted 800 years ago. In particular, I would say our presence here is a living witness to the spirit encapsulated in that marvellous Dominican motto: ‘To contemplate and to pass on to others the fruits of your contemplation.’

It is worth repeating these profound words:

‘To contemplate, and to pass on to others, the fruits of your contemplation.’

We are twigs on the branches of a great Totara – not even a branch itself, only a twig on a branch. And yet we have come from something which is much bigger than what we are as individuals. 800 years in human history is a significant amount of time but what is more significant is that the tree is still maturing. Where we have come from, what we have learnt, and what unites us today, must be passed on through our lives to the next generation. New growth must form from our humble twigs. We must try our best to use the gifts God has given each one of us to the good of all we meet. Each has a different set of gifts, excellent gifts, just like those of the first Sisters who left Sion Hill for Dunedin almost 145 years ago. To quote from the ‘Star in the South’: “Indicative of the calibre of those being sent was Sister M. Catherine (40yrs old, professed for 13 years) who had studied under a pupil of Chopin and was a highly gifted musician.”

145 years later, and the world is a very different place to that which greeted the new Bishop and Sisters when they arrived in Dunedin. Our far flung country is now part of a ‘Global Village’ and the Order of Preachers mission of education here is no longer directly through the schools they once staffed. Instead, it is now through each one of us and the Dominican Family throughout New Zealand, educating and engaging in a myriad of new ways brought about through the technological revolution. Through all the challenges, we can take courage from the support we have in our Dominican Family. We can continue on our journeys ahead remembering the words of Sr. Cecily Sheehy OP’s Dominican hymn: “As we journey now together, giving praise to Saints of old. So we sing our own true story, to create a better world.”

David Loving-Molloy