

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS: Fr. Mark O'Brien OP****Some Thoughts Towards A Dominican Idea of Leadership**

We are in the year of Luke, that is, the third cycle of readings for our Sunday liturgies, and it is supposed to be a mark of the Dominican family that the liturgy and the Gospels are formative factors in our lives. Hence, I would like to commence this talk with the Bible, specifically Luke. I would then like to develop my thoughts on Luke in a more specifically theological and Dominican direction that will hopefully provide some contribution towards a Dominican idea of leadership. It is important to anchor such reflections in our own experience and hence I will offer some examples of how Dominican educators have seen their leadership role in Australia and implemented it to the best of their ability. I will conclude with some reflections on the present situation in Catholic education and its implications.

**Leadership in Luke's Gospel**

Last Sunday's reading came from chapter 12, well into that stage of the Gospel that scholars believe begins in 9:51, the statement that 'when the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem'. It is the journey theme, an appropriate one for our situation, for we perceive that we are at a crucial stage in the Dominican journey in Australia. After signalling a strategic development in his story of Jesus, Luke has him send out seventy disciples to proclaim his message and, on their return, turns their attention from exulting in victory over demons to being messengers of God's good news (rejoice rather that your names are written in heaven). Next follows the parable of the Good Samaritan and then the well known story of Martha and Mary.

In this account, Martha and Mary are hosting a visit by Jesus. The role of hostess is an intriguing one, combining two important roles—that of leader and servant. As a hostess she makes the invitations, she plans the evening, she is in charge; but she also spends her whole time serving guests. A situation familiar to most of us. Does Luke choose this story because he wants to suggest that a good leader is a good servant? Martha desires to be the perfect hostess but Jesus points to Mary and suggests Martha should relax, take a seat and listen to him. As you know this story became a battle ground in the debate over the merits of the active (Martha) and contemplative lives (Mary). I think this tends to distort what I see as the twofold trust in the story.

One is that Jesus politely but firmly turns the tables on Martha and Mary. They want to play host to their honoured guest but Jesus takes over as host and makes them his honoured guests. In doing so, he combines the roles of leader and servant: he gives them his teaching and his time. The second thrust concerns the nature of his teaching. I think Luke provides a clue by locating this story immediately after the parable of the Good Samaritan. Luke subtly portrays Martha as wanting to be a good Samaritan but, in order to become one, she needs to learn from the Good Samaritan himself.

This in turn invites reflection on this parable in relation to the themes of leader and servant. Given that the good Samaritan is Jesus, I would suggest that the person lying in the road is every human being. This is how we are found by Jesus, beaten up in some way on our journey through life, rather helpless and in need of having our wounds attended to and healed. In the parable, the good Samaritan doesn't just dump the fellow in the inn and forget him: he makes arrangements for a return. There is a commitment to ongoing care or service. Because this parable is located early on in the great journey section of Luke's Gospel, Luke wants us to understand all that takes place on the

journey as an illustration of that ongoing care that the Good Samaritan provides. If you like, the remainder of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is about the relationship between the Good Samaritan and the one found abandoned, between Jesus and the disciple. Two aspects of this relationship can be highlighted. One is that Jesus never treats another person as a problem. People have problems and difficulties but a human being is not a problem. He or she is another human being. Once we treat another human being as a problem, I think we have diminished their humanity in some way, turned them into an object rather than a subject. This can be a trap for leaders. The second is freedom. Jesus never imposes himself on another person: he may invite or challenge a person about what he or she should do but the decision is always left up to the person. Often in the Gospels, he will say 'go your way, your faith has saved you' or words to that effect. No one is expected to follow him around like a pet dog. A fatal mistake of leadership is to foster dependence rather than interdependence.

Another point that emerges from the context in which Luke sets this parable is that once we have been healed and taught by Jesus, then we are meant to become good Samaritans ourselves. But we always need to remember that just as we find those in need and try to help them, so we ourselves were first found in need and healed. The Bible says that it is better to give than receive and so it is; but to be able to give one must first have something to give; we need to receive in order that we in our turn may give.

### **Dominican Reflections on Leadership**

There is another crucial difference between ourselves as disciples and Jesus. As the Good Samaritan, he always acts out of perfect love towards the other; we on the other hand cannot do this; certainly not always and maybe sometimes with a lot of effort. We need to be schooled in how to be a disciple and this is no doubt the purpose of much of Jesus' teaching in Luke's Gospel and in the other Gospels as well. I would now like to flesh out this idea in traditional or classical and also Dominican terms: I am of course talking about the kind of moral life that makes men and women into leaders: in Dominican and specifically Thomistic terms this involves a theology of virtues.

I am not a moral theologian or a philosopher but I have the impression that there is a lively debate going on in Europe and elsewhere at the moment about the foundations of the moral life; whether it should be based on the rule of law or the acquiring of virtue. For Aquinas the essence of the moral life, of learning how to be fully human, in Christian terms to be a disciple of Jesus, lay in the acquiring of virtues. Certainly we need rules and regulations as learning tools and to chart the boundaries in relationships that need to be respected. But if our moral life does not go beyond keeping rules and regulations then our growth as human beings will remain stunted. For him the purpose of rules and regulations is to enable a person to acquire the appropriate good habit or virtue: for example, to act in a way that is just, compassionate, humble, courageous, gentle and loving, and hopefully to do this in a virtuous way—instinctively as it were and not in obedience to rules.

In short, one goes beyond keeping rules to forming relationships, to living in a community. How else do we know we are growing as human beings unless we are in some kind of relationship with another or others? It is within the context of a community and its interactions that we learn. Hence the connection in Dominican life between community life and study: even though we do it and seem to do it more frequently these days, it has traditionally been regarded as abnormal for a Dominican to live alone. The task of preaching the Gospel takes priority of course and community life can be waived for a time in favour of it. But, the assumption has been that if this goes on for too long, then

one's preaching witness will suffer. To put this another way, something in the life of virtue will start to decay.

A very useful book on virtues as what makes us human in the best sense is Andre Comte-Sponville's *A Short Treatise on the Great Virtues*.<sup>1</sup> It was on the French best-seller list for 14 months. Virtue is the capacity or power to be human, and that is to act in a good manner. Although an atheist, Comte-Sponville constantly invokes the teachings of Jesus, Augustine, Aquinas, Spinoza and other great minds from the Jewish-Christian tradition. What I found particularly interesting is his interpretation of Augustine's famous commentary on 1 John 'love and do what you wish'. If we really loved then we would instinctively and freely want to do the best for the other person in the relationship. Love would be the power driving us or impelling us to this. But, as Comte-Sponville remarks, we are rotten lovers and so we need morality: we need to acquire all those virtues that hopefully will enable us—eventually—to be virtuous lovers. To quote him: 'we need morality only for want of love, which is why we need it so! Love commands, but we do not love; and so love commands in the absence of love, commands by its very absence. Duty...obliges us to that which we would do simply out of love, if in fact we loved'.<sup>2</sup> Hence, his maxim for the moral life is 'act as though you loved'. He ends his book by saying 'The virtues are nearly all justified by our lack of love; in other words, they are fully justified. Love commits us to morality and frees us from it. Morality commits us to love, even in its absence, and must yield before it'. I don't think Comte-Sponville means that we are unable to love until we have perfected all the other virtues. But our continual need for these virtues suggests that our love will always in some way fall short.

It's a powerful thesis but I would like to suggest a corrective from a Christian point of view to what might appear a somewhat bleak point of view. I am sure Aquinas would agree with much of what Comte-Sponville has to say but for Aquinas an integral part of the Christian life of virtue is the gift of the infused or theological virtues—namely faith hope and love. The Christian claim is that one who believes in Jesus—has received the gift of faith—is thereby also able to love as Jesus loves. He receives the gift of love, or what we would call the grace to love. This gift of love, we believe, permeates all the moral virtues and enables the believer to be compassionate as Christ is compassionate, to be courageous as Christ is courageous, to be prudent as Christ is prudent. We tend to think of prudence as the ability to take the middle road, to avoid extremes and maintain order and peace. For Aquinas however, prudence or good-sense is the virtue that enables all the other virtues to function at their best—in this sense it is the mean of the virtues. Thus, within the context of the moral life, a prudent Christian should be most courageous, compassionate and humble. Within the context of the intellectual life, a prudent person will be most studious, a most careful listener and most respectful in a way that is appropriate to his or her context. And of course, the prudent lover will be the most devoted but clear sighted lover; the one who loves the other person precisely as other and not as an image of oneself, who sees the other for what he or she is, but also realistically as another limited human being. A measure of this love will be a relationship in which freedom flourishes, in which the decisions of the other are respected and honoured, even if these decisions lead to radical changes in the relationship or even its rupture. It is worth noting that, for Aquinas and presumably for

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<sup>1</sup> Andre Comte-Sponville's *A Short Treatise on the Great Virtues*, Vintage Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *A Short Treatise*; pp. 223-224.

Comte-Sponville, love at its best is not an experience, an emotion, but an activity, a virtuous act. Happiness or the ‘good life’ for Aquinas is not feeling great but living, acting virtuously or lovingly.<sup>3</sup>

The way Comte-Sponville portrays the life of virtue, one could get the impression that we will spend most of our life learning how to live morally in the hope that one day we may be free—to love and do what we wish. In contrast to this, Christian (and Dominican) theology would argue that we are already freed by the reconciling grace of Christ. True, we can never claim to be completely free of the things that enslave us but, in Christ, we enjoy a real measure of freedom, the kind of freedom that also empowers us or graces us to live virtuously. If we are called to be leaders in our community, and this involves building relationships, then the Dominican stance is that cultivating virtues rather than obeying rules is the key and the goal.

### **Dominican leadership in Australia**

In relation to this it is significant that the recent book on Dominicans and education published by ATF has as its title ‘Towards the Intelligent Use of Liberty’<sup>4</sup>. Study is an essential ingredient in developing the virtuous life and Dominicans involved in educating the young to become virtuous adults are challenged to combine the roles of leader and servant in this endeavour. Or, to put this another way, the teacher, like Jesus in Luke’s Gospel, must also be the servant of his or her pupils. This unity is well expressed by the Constitution of the Dominican Sisters of Ireland, adopted by the Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia as part of their educational policy:

‘The Sisters must respect the dignity of the child and, consequently, preserve the right order of relations between their pupils and themselves. The teacher’s function is to stimulate the child’s God-given intelligence, to aid her to acquire and assimilate knowledge; she is, therefore, definitely a coadjutor, and relatively subordinate to the pupil. Her control over the child’s activity is diplomatic only: in proportion as she elicits the child’s cooperation is her work a real success. Finally, the teacher must realise that her training of the child is to prepare her for independent life, not only by ensuring her possession of suitable knowledge but, especially, by leading her to an intelligent use of liberty’<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the Sisters see the purpose of religious education ‘to cultivate...child’s baptismal gifts of Faith, Hope and Charity and the moral virtues’ (303). In other words the cultivation of the moral virtues will enable people to make intelligent (in moral terms prudent) use of the liberty they enjoy as the sons and daughters of God. But in order to be able to serve this rich fare to their student guests, the hosts, Dominican educators, need to have gone through their own schooling, to have experienced their own limitations and need for God’s liberation: in short to have received what they can then give. Dominicans have long faced the challenge of the virtuous life, prompted initially by the need to respond to the powerful challenge of the Albigensian heresy with its conviction that salvation can only lie in a flight from this world and our corrupt life, that our flesh is irretrievably evil and only the

<sup>3</sup> As noted by Herbert McCabe, *The Good Life. Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness*. (London: Continuum, 2005) 50-51.

<sup>4</sup> *Towards the Intelligent Use of Liberty. Dominican Approaches in Education*. Gabrielle Kelly OP & Kevin Saunders OP (eds.); Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Britt and Judith Lawson ‘To the Ends of the Earth: Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia’ in *Towards the Intelligent Use of Liberty*; pp. 303-4

spirit can be saved. The thrust of Dominican education/formation has been incarnational, convinced that Christ has provided us with the grace to become his disciples in this world and to enable others to do the same; to pass on to others what we have received. In the time honoured phrase 'to contemplate and to pass on to others the fruits of contemplation'.

### **Present Experience and its Implications**

But there is a danger with old orders like ours with its long tradition that it thinks it knows it all and has it all—a fatal mistake. How well prepared are we to meet the rapid changes that are likely to face us in the contemporary world; how welcoming are we of new ideas and the bearers of these ideas, those increasingly taking on educational roles that were traditionally filled by Sisters and Friars. Do we see them as, as Jesus would, as worthy disciples and bearers of good news? I will conclude this talk with a few reflections on current challenges. Because I am not directly involved in educational programmes, I will make use of an article by David Ranson in a 2006 issue of the ACR 'Forming a New Generation of Leaders for Catholic Schools'.<sup>6</sup> I hope it resonates in some way with your own experience and ideas.

Ranson argues that, in the past there was a close partnership in the Australian church between parish and schools: 'the presence of the Australian Catholic school has primarily ensured identity, especially in the manner that it has become the primary manifestation of the local ecclesial community, the parish, and the principal means of that community to religiously enculturate its young members' (417). He then identifies three factors that will have a major impact on this relationship. One is that the success of Catholic Education has enhanced its social prestige and Catholic Schools are now sought not so much for the 'spiritual orientation' of the school (sic. Its Catholic identity) but for what is perceived as quality education. Second, diminishing parish participation means that quite a number of parishes would now not be viable without an associated school(s). Third, the decline in the number of resident parish priests has created a kind of leadership vacuum. He believes that this will focus attention on the school and its staff to fill the leadership vacuum. But the climate in which this is emerging is quite different to the one in which Catholic education first emerged, a more tribal, us-versus-them mentality, concerned to build an almost military community of loyal Catholics. Ranson believes 'New forms of pastoral leadership are set to emerge within the Australian context, no longer predominantly concerned with issues of identity in an adversarial climate but committed to the invigoration of community discipleship and dedicated to a new impulse in evangelisation' (418).

Among other things, he concludes or recommends that 'the very possibility that future leadership of our schools will bear a pastoral responsibility, and become the face of local religious leadership, beyond simply the school community, should begin to impinge upon a longer term succession planning' (419). A final quote about how he thinks this rapidly 'approaching' future may evolve: 'To lead when the objectives are not clear, when directions are elusive, when results are not forthcoming, when we have been cast adrift from the past but realise that the new shore will not be reached in our own lifetime, calls for a particular leadership' (421).

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<sup>6</sup> David Ranson, 'Forming a New Generation of Leaders for Catholic Schools,' *ACR* 83/4 (2006) 415-21.

You who are directly involved in Catholic education in Australia are no doubt more alert to this rapidly changing scene than I am. Hopefully these few reflections that I have offered from the biblical and Dominican perspective may be of some help in preparing to meet the challenge. In conclusion I would like to endorse Ranson's words about the elusive, often frustrating and never finished business of leadership as service to others. It resonates well with the Dominican motto of Truth, where the emphasis is on the search for it rather than the claim to possess it. We also have the example of Dominic who, when confronted by poverty and need in the town where he was studying, sold all his books (surely his most prized possession) to help the poor. A key element of Christian leadership, which is Christian discipleship, is to be willing to give away all one's possessions for the sake of the Gospel injunction to 'love others as you love yourself'. Presumably, this means that Christian and Dominican leadership can never be seen as some kind of possession or entitlement.