

STEWARDSHIP IN THE DOMINICAN TRADITION

Mary Britt OP August 15 2008

“Keep in mind that each of you has your own vineyard, but this is joined to your neighbours’ vineyards without any dividing lines, so that you cannot do good or evil for yourself without doing the same for your neighbours.”
- *Dialogue of Catherine of Siena*

Introductory remarks

This quotation from Catherine of Siena’s Dialogue with God is surely well chosen to inspire and challenge us all as we come together in this symposium. For me today it certainly carries a challenge; but I hope Catherine has been looking over my shoulder and nudging me along the way.

Today and tomorrow you will be exploring the task of being a steward of Dominican Ministry and considering the formation the steward needs. Previously Diana Woods has talked with you about truth in the Dominican tradition and Mark O’Brien about leadership. I shall try to avoid going over the same ground but hope that what I offer you will be at least consistent with their reflections.

Clarification of the title

It may be helpful to begin by some clarification of the title for this opening session of today’s proceedings: **What will it mean to be Stewards of the Church in the Dominican Tradition as we move into the future?** What indeed ! Whether the future be short, as it is for me, or long, as we hope it will be for the Dominican family, it is imperative that we explore this question, seeking both the wisdom and the prudence which will enable us to live with the question and go on searching for the answers. Writing about Dominican education, Philip Smith quotes this description of tradition:

‘Tradition is the record of the community’s conversation over time about its meaning and direction. A living tradition is a tradition that can raise questions about itself’. (See ‘A Dominican Philosophy of Education’ in *Dominican Approaches to Education*, AFT Press, Adelaide 2007)

We are here to carry on the conversation and ask some of the questions. **The questions I have in mind are these: Of what are we called to be stewards? In other words, what is it we are called to care for and hand on? And then, what answers does our tradition offer to those questions?** My brief is to reflect on the Dominican Tradition; but let us begin with the Church.

The Church - an institution within a mystery

The Church is very visible in the world as an institution, a human phenomenon, a complex organisation, established within diverse cultures but having a global as well as a local structure. But the Church is not confined by the visible institution. The source of the life of the Church is the continuing Mystery of the Incarnation, the revelation of God in the person of Jesus the Christ who shares his life with us through the living water of Baptism and the living bread of the Eucharist. So what does ‘Stewards of the Church’ mean for you and me?

I am suggesting that it means stewards not of the institution as such but of the mystery. Baptism makes us members of the institution - our names are entered in the official registers. But more importantly Baptism grafts us into the life of the risen Christ, inserts us, as it were, into the mystery of the Church. There, within the institution, we are called to be stewards, in our own life situation and commitment, of the mystery revealed in the Gospels. This is where the Spirit finds us and where we find the Spirit. The role of the institution is to be at the service of the mystery.

The steward in biblical texts

The stewards we meet in the Bible are always servants of their masters, responsible for carrying out the master's wishes. The Cana story in John (2: 1-11) comes to mind; and stories of good and bad stewards in chapters 12 and 16 of the Gospel of Luke. Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians (4: 1), refers to apostles like himself as '*servants of Christ*' and '*stewards of God's mysteries*'. He goes on to say that stewards must be found trustworthy. In the letter to Titus he declares that a bishop, as God's steward, '*must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine*'. The bishop, in other words, must be found faithful to the Gospel. Paul also suggests that if he is to be a credible preacher, the bishop's life must be blameless. (Titus 1: 7-9)

In Peter's first letter, however, we find him addressing exiled Christians with this exhortation: '*As each has received a gift, employ it for one another as good stewards of God's varied grace*'. (4:10) That sounds more like us? In Dominic's time, only bishops were accorded the right to preach and teach. The poor quality of their stewardship in the twelfth century was a catalyst for Dominic's determination to initiate what came to be called 'the holy preaching' and eventually the Order of Preachers. For Dominic and for us Christ is the Master whose wishes we are to carry out. It is his truth that is entrusted to us, his truth that we claim to preach and teach..

The image of the shepherd

A different biblical image seems to me to cast more light on our calling and responsibility as educators and administrators: the image of the shepherd. This image was very familiar to the people of Israel. Their kings and their religious leaders were understood to be called by God to be good shepherds of their people. That they often failed to live that ideal is made clear by the Prophet Ezechiel (ch.34) who passes on to them God's scathing criticism of their failures and a divine promise: '*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep*'. More familiar to us is the extended image of the shepherd in the Gospel according to John. There Jesus takes up this image to make it an explicit description of his own relationship with the people of God and therefore a role-description for those who would become his followers. The imagery is quite complex; but let us hear those words which have particular significance for us in today's context.

The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the flock; the sheep hear his voice; one by one he calls his own sheep and leads them out. When he has brought out his flock, he goes ahead of them; and the sheep follow because they know his voice. ... Anyone who enters through me will be safe; will go freely in and out and be sure of finding pasture. ... I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. ... I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep. (Jn 10:2-5, 9-11)

The shepherd image can also be found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Matthew and Luke both recall the parable of the lost sheep.

Tell me. Suppose a man has a hundred sheep and one of them strays; will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go in search of the stray? I tell you solemnly, when he finds it, it gives him more joy than do the ninety-nine that did not stray at all. Similarly, it is never the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. (Matt. 18: 12-14)

What light do these images cast on our own responsibilities if we are to be good shepherds in the ministry of education? Few minutes for group reflection.

In these texts we hear references to leadership, but also to shelter, to protection, to nourishment and nurture, all actions associated with hospitality, itself a good symbol for educators. In John, it is clear that the shepherd is responsible for the good of the whole flock. In Matthew, the shepherd is responsible for the good of every individual member of the flock, especially one who needs extraordinary care. At

every level of our ministry these images question us about what we do and how we do it, how we 'lay down our lives' for those we hope to serve.

In our schools, children and adolescents should not only hear but experience what it means to live the Christian life. In John we are reminded that the sheep respond to the shepherd's voice because they trust him. Teachers, administrators, board members, like the bishop Paul described, are to be found trustworthy ministers of the Gospel. Some have responsibility for the whole flock; those who meet students face to face carry that responsibility in direct relationship with individuals. All need the support of mutual understanding and commitment to the shared task.

The Dominican tradition

When we turn our attention to the Dominican tradition within the Church, we are dealing not just with the history of the Congregations of women who arrived in Australia in the nineteenth century. We are involved with a movement whose roots are 800 years old and whose branches are to be found in more than a hundred countries around the world. Belonging to the Dominican family gives us access to a tradition richly diverse in its manifestations. How do we identify the core or heart of that tradition in order to establish our claim to belong?

Truth. To Praise, to Bless, to Preach. To Contemplate and Share with Others the Fruits of Contemplation. Each of these mottoes has been used as a way of summing up our role and purpose within the mission of the Church, or what is referred to as our charism. The word has been ringing in our ears since the Vatican Council directed religious orders to review their lives in the light of the Gospel, their founder's vision and their 'sound traditions', in order to bear effective witness to the Gospel within the Church and in the wider world.

Charism became shorthand for what religious believed were their sound traditions. The word carries a lot of emotional content. At times it has meant what one wants it to mean because of what one hopes it means. Mark O'Brien once said that if we really want to know what our charism is we should ask those with whom and for whom we work.

Who are we? Charism, tradition, spirituality, story.

That charism eludes definition is not surprising when we remember that the word is related to the manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit, the charismata. In that sense Dominic's vision and project are recognised as gifts of grace given for the life of the Church. There are other words, however, which help us to describe charism. Tradition is one, spirituality is another. All are ways of describing a particular style of Christian life.

Edward Schillebeeckx, one of the most revered living members of the Dominican family, uses the simple word **story** as a tool for exploring our identity and purpose. In a collection of his writing published in English in 1983 he reflects on Dominican life under the heading *Dominican Spirituality*. (*God Among Us*, SCM Press, London 1983) He writes:

For the most part, people live by stories. I myself live by my own story. When I became a Dominican I linked my life story with the family story of the Dominicans: as a result, my life took on a new orientation and I picked up the thread of the story of the Order in my own way. The Dominican story begins with Dominic and his first companions; together they stand at the beginning of what is to become the Dominican family story. They gave the story its theme: they set its tone. However, this story, often retold and sometimes rewritten, is in itself a particular way in which the thread of an already older story, that of Jesus of Nazareth, is taken up and continued in a new manner. Dominican spirituality is only valid in so far as it takes up the story of Jesus and brings it up to date in its own way. In its Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life, the Second Vatican Council said that 'to follow Jesus' is the ultimate and supreme norm of any form of religious life. Dominican spirituality is therefore subject to the criterion of the sources of all Christian life. This also means that even the 'Dominican spirituality' of Dominic and his

first followers is not directly an absolute law for Dominicans. A fuller and more sophisticated knowledge of the 'story of Jesus' which has become possible since then may therefore lead us to different emphases from those of Dominic and his followers.

What do you find most significant in that statement?

Anything you want to share with the group?

Some important 'emphases' in the story

In search of some of the emphases to which Schillebeeckx refers we look first to our ancestors in the tradition, and first of all to **Dominic himself**. (C 12-13) Dominic defended the doctrine of the Incarnation and the integrity of the human person against the belief that all matter is evil and therefore the body is the enemy of the human spirit. Ironically, today we must engage with a world which glorifies the body and material success rather than the life of the spirit. We also inherit from Dominic the conviction that to preach the Word we must first contemplate it together in study, reflection and prayer; that to preach with compassion we must know and engage the world of our listeners.

From Albert and Thomas (C 13) we inherit the conviction that faith and reason are not in conflict but companions in the search for truth, which is to be respected wherever it is found.

From Catherine (C 14) we learn that true loyalty to the Church can call us to challenge those in authority with honesty and compassion. She did not hesitate to challenge the Pope; but in so doing she called him 'Sweet Christ on earth'.

From Montesino, Las Casas and Vitoria (C 16) we learn that truth and justice are inseparable; that fidelity to the truth of the Gospel demands defence of the human dignity and equal rights of oppressed people against the power of those who oppress them.

Early in the twentieth century **Marie-Joseph Lagrange** applied new methods of research to biblical scholarship, seeking greater understanding of the texts which are fundamental to the life of the Church. He was criticised and sidelined to a parish in the south of France; but the value of his work flourished in the biblical revival that followed.

Yves Congar was one of the most significant scholars involved in debates and reflections during the Vatican Council. His strongly ecumenical theology of Church influenced the Council's Decree on Ecumenism. Afterwards, however, his respect for other traditions and concern for genuine dialogue towards unity were often met by institutional concerns about apparently irreconcilable differences.

The same spirit that inspired Montesino, Las Casas and Vitoria moved **Albert Nolan** to defend the human rights of indigenous Africans against the injustices of the powerful apartheid regime in South Africa.

Bruno Hussar, Jewish by birth, Catholic by conversion, Friar in one of the French Provinces of the Order, was sent to Israel to set up a community to study Judaism. In the midst of racial division and conflict he established Neveh Shalom, a village where Jewish and Arab families could live together in harmony. Neveh Shalom has survived Bruno's death.

Catherine is the only woman in that list. She is probably more widely revered amongst us now than ever before, thanks in part to the women scholars who have researched her life and writings. She dared to challenge the Church to be true to the Gospel. Today some Dominican women scholars have taken up the challenge to bring the perspective of women to their theological and scriptural studies. That perspective brings new understandings of the scriptures and of the full discipleship to which women are called in the Church. **Mary Catherine Hilkert and Barbara Reid are among them.**

Some tentative answers to the question: What is it we are called to cherish and hand on?

The gospel story of Jesus

Christian faith enlightened by sound scholarship

A style of Christian life characterised by fidelity to truth and openness to new learning

The perspective of our pioneer Sisters

The values we have been considering are reflected, I believe, in the traditions the pioneer Sisters brought with them to Australia in the nineteenth century. Their 1853 Constitutions reminded them that as teachers *'we are associated with Christ Jesus in the great mystery of redemption'*. And again: *'Let your zeal reach to everything that will enable you to discharge this duty with effect. .. Let no department of knowledge ... be undervalued or neglected. Justice and charity demand this of you'*. Envisaged is an integration of religious and secular elements in the education process, reflecting the insights of Albert and Thomas. In harmony with the good shepherd image, the responsibilities of the teacher are seen as derived from the rights of the child.

The unity of the education process is developed further in the 1939 Constitutions. A chapter on Educational Work reminds the Sisters *that while religious and secular education can theoretically be separated, in practice it is not possible; and that neutral education is a fiction*. The purpose of religious education is *to cultivate...the child's Baptismal gifts of Faith, Hope and Charity and the moral virtues, so that she may, in the Mystic Body of Christ, fulfil the functions Providence intends*.

Secular education, however is to be equally thorough, as *an obligation in justice to the child ... to prepare her adequately for the place she is to occupy in this life. This requires not only essential knowledge but 'all that is comprised in the notion of culture - appreciation of worthy ideals, love of the beautiful, refinement of taste, nobility of heart, sympathy with national traditions. To impart this is truly part of the Congregation's raison d'etre*.

Of particular interest is this enlightened understanding of the role of the teacher in relation to the rights of the child: *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 (sic) 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'*.

This description of the role of the teacher points to a responsibility to bring into service the best available scholarship in the art of teaching, taking advantage of continuing progress in educational theory and in the theory of human and religious development. Though they did not quote it, I wonder whether the writers of these foundational documents had in mind the question St Thomas once put to himself: *Can one person teach another?* He answers: *No. One can only put the other in the way of learning*.

There are insights here also into the role of stewards and shepherds. First, in those roles *'we are associated with Christ in the great mystery of redemption'*. In other words, we dare to involve our selves in the child's developing relationship with God. Second, we are obliged to safeguard the dignity and rights of the child, for whom the whole education project exists. Third, both justice and charity demand an integration of religious and secular education designed to lead to the intelligent use of liberty.

For these principles to underpin what happens in the classroom, a coherent and explicit understanding of those principles is required at all levels of the school structure. In an ideal situation these principles would be understood and promoted at each level of decision making, from governing boards to curriculum designers to classroom teachers.

We have never found ourselves in that ideal scenario; and a century of hard work passed before an attempt was made to find out what was really happening in Catholic education. In the late 60s Carmel Leavey's doctoral research confirmed some of our pioneers' insights. A propos integrated education, it emerged that religious education depends heavily on other forms of knowing; that is to say, the overall quality of the school as school is highly significant to its effectiveness in religious education. In another significant result, apropos the intelligent use of liberty, the key items on the religious scale turned out to be the free choice items, which gave students an opportunity to say something about their own intentions and choices.

Looking at some of our ancestors and contemporaries, we can recognise a family likeness in the ways they remained faithful to Dominic's original vision and gave it new life in response to widely

differing circumstances and challenges. Their stories exemplify Schillebeeckx's insistence that what makes the Dominican tradition valid at any time is its commitment to taking up the story of Jesus and living it in a new way. When we fail to do that we betray the Master who has called us into his service and we dishonour the family tradition.

Where are we now?

Chinese wisdom tells us that what may appear to be a crisis is an opportunity to create something new. Timothy Radcliffe has described Dominic's life as 'moulded by response to situations he never anticipated'. Many of us may well say 'me too'. Certainly we are now facing a set of circumstances which in the 1960s would not have seemed possible; a situation which demands enlightened deliberation and courageous decisions.

From the beginning our Congregations took full responsibility for the ministries we established in our own name. Gradually we have relinquished ownership and sponsorship of ministries for which we no longer had the human resources they required. By some sisters the loss of those ministries was experienced as a loss of our shared identity. Perhaps over time their dismay may have given way to resignation and resignation to realism.

As we look ahead to what now seems not only possible but inevitable we may have a better grasp of what gives us our identity; but we are faced with a new challenge: How shall we set about sharing a vision with those who will pick up and carry the tradition into the future? How shall we put them in the way of the ongoing learning they will need to pursue that role?

Some relevant research

To explore the concept of stewardship in relation to governance the NCEC and the ACLRI engaged Carmel Leavey in 2000 for a School Governance Project, to gather insights from the available literature and learn what models of governance were in use in Catholic schools across the country. Various understandings of stewardship and governance emerged; and there were ten governance models in use.

While the word stewardship may be freely used in 'Church speak', it has no status in civil law. Governance of schools, however, entails compliance with civil law and raises questions about sponsorship, ownership, trusteeship if the Congregation were to withdraw from these roles. Within the Church, there are further compliance issues around the concept of the juridic person. While our role in the Church is concerned with the mystery, these facts remind us that we are also members of the institution.

You are probably more familiar with the relevant literature than I am; but recalling a few of the insights found there may help us to move from the ideal to the real. Patricia Vandenberg and Kathryn Grant, authors of *After We're Gone: Creating Sustainable Sponsorships*, identified four waves or stages in the evolution of governance in Catholic institutions in USA as they moved from a family business model to franchise, to partnership, to lay sponsorship.

We ourselves seem to have moved from the family business into the partnership stage, retaining ownership and sponsorship but incorporating schools and appointing boards to share the responsibilities of management. This has been our model for twenty years or more. Now, however, our circumstances are such that the challenge to prepare for the stage described as lay sponsorship must be faced.

Maintaining priorities

I have been using the terms mystery and institution in an attempt to clarify our role within the Church. Within our own institutions these concepts might be translated as ministry and business, or ministry and management, the business existing not for its own sake but in order to be at the service of the ministry. The business, in fact, has no other justification for its existence. Skilled professional management is necessary; but there are already some cautionary tales about the danger that 'big business' management styles can undermine the integrity of ministry. This points to the crucial importance of recruitment and formation of those who would become new sponsors and trustees.

We are not just competitors in the market for independent education. Even more important than good management qualifications for people taking on those responsibilities would be a strong, enlightened faith, an understanding that they are called not just to run a successful business but to be stewards of the Gospel and good shepherds of the young as they grow towards human and Christian maturity.

Dominic's vision saw mission issuing from community. He understood well the preacher's need for the support of a reflective, praying group of companions. For us, this shared spiritual support is not an optional extra. It is an essential element of the tradition we hope to hand on, an indispensable mutual 'inservice'.

A future full of hope?

Some of the difficulties and dilemmas associated with the transfer of authority and responsibility have already been identified. That material will be a valuable resource as you seek a structure designed, in the first place, to enable fidelity to the tradition; and at the same time to comply with Church and civil law. In those negotiations some limitations may be placed on choice. In our own institutions we would do well to heed Schillebeeckx's suggestion that structures should be as democratic as possible, to allow flexibility in response to new developments.

Perhaps the most challenging question we meet in our searching is posed by the sociologist of religion Thomas O'Dea. Discussing what he calls the routinisation of charism, he suggests that by the third generation after the charismatic leader there are real difficulties in the 'followers' retaining the charism. What do we find in the Dominican story? Over 800 years, a mixture of strength and weakness, of fidelity and failure, of serious decline and inspired renewal. Among our immediate ancestors, the Irish Sisters' determined revival after persecution and Margaret Hallahan's new foundation at Stone in England speak to us of the tradition's capacity for survival and resilience. However, O'Dea prompts us to face this question. Can the tradition we cherish be carried into the future if there is no 'living link' to the original story? How long will the tradition survive in schools in the absence of the original owners?

We cannot know the answers. But fidelity to our heritage demands that we plan for sound structures and enlightened formation, in order to enable others to carry the torch as far as they can. If we believe that what we are called to cherish and hand on is a way of living the truth of the Gospel, then our hope for those who will carry on our ministry in education would be that they be committed to keep alive the story of Jesus, even if our own story be forgotten.

To conclude, we look to the Word of God for encouragement. Matthew ends his Gospel with Christ's promise to those who would be his disciples: ***'Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time'*** (28:20). Writing to Timothy, Paul told him ***'you have been entrusted with something precious; guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us'***.(2Tim 1:14) So we may confidently make our own Paul's prayer in the letter to the Ephesians: ***'Glory be to God whose power working within us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine'***. (Eph. 3: 20-1) So be it !