"Divine Providence and Dominican Vocation: Black and White in a World of Grey"

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1. A Reprise of 2014

Two years ago at one of these gatherings, I read a paper, "St. Thomas Aquinas and Vocational Discernment," which the Irish Dominicans subsequently published in their *Religious Life Review*.[1] Drawing on the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas, I explained why the contemporary practice of encouraging a man "to discern" a priestly vocation can misfire. Aquinas and the commentators that both follow and interpret him prefer another mode by which a young man discovers his vocation to consecrated life and the priesthood, one that puts priority focus on the gift of divine grace that we call "a vocation." Because Dominicans take Aquinas as a theological guide, they accordingly direct a young man in whom interest in a priestly vocation emerges to recognize the gift of divine grace that stands behind this awakening. Further, they would encourage someone to embrace rather than "to discern" the grace to be a priest. To grasp the truth of this Dominican point of view, each of you needs only to ask yourself why on a perfectly pleasant Saturday evening you have come to the Dominican House of Studies to hear a lecture about consecrated life and priesthood instead of doing what most other young men of your age are doing tonight, even when such activity remains perfectly innocent. If you think that

[1] See *Religious Life Review*, vol. 54, no. 291 (2015), 69–84.

the answer to this question lies within yourself, your free will, your choice, then you need to learn more about the interplay between divine grace and human freedom.

The ultimate explanation, in brief, for why you have come to a vocation weekend lies with God. He drew you here, freely. True enough, you may find yourselves thinking about all of the proximate motives and occasions that persuaded you to spend a weekend in DC. For instance, "I had nothing better to do." Or, "I know someone here, and he seems happy enough." Perhaps even, "I'm making a tour of all religious institutes in the United States that seem to have a future." These and any number of other reasons may have contributed to your choosing to come to the House of Studies, but none of them fully explains the cause of your choice. In fact, a gift of divine grace moved your freedom sweetly and firmly to pass over other possibilities, to come to Washington, and to inquire about Dominican life. Nothing out of the ordinary occurs in this premotion. That's how God, the giver of all good gifts, works. Beyond the ordinary way in which God sustains all human activity, your visiting the Dominicans results from a grace that God gives to young men whom he also moves to receive it.

Even though much contemporary speech about vocations employs the word "discernment," the practice still remains fraught with difficulties. When people engage in discernment, they do not necessarily ignore God. After all, they set about to discern God's will in order to obey it. However, absent very strict tutoring and apprenticeship in the right practice of discernment, this exercise can easily turn inward the person who attempts it. In other words, the one discerning starts to think more about himself than about God, to dwell more on his own qualities and characteristics than on the divine grace and favor that comes from God, to agonize

over future hypothetical situations, e.g., can I survive a lifetime as a celibate, rather than to take comfort in the supernatural support that God's providential care always provides. To the extent that these subjective, inward turning movements take hold of the man who undertakes "to discern" a vocation to the priesthood, such a one grows distracted from the divine realities that govern the world of men. The preoccupied discerner easily loses sight of the gift that God offers him to merit his own salvation and to work instrumentally for the salvation of others. Put otherwise, he sidesteps the grace of the moment. Since no natural analogue exists for the Catholic priesthood (unlike marriage), Dominicans prefer to speak about the grace to be a priest, not about discernment.[2]

One may inquire why the Church herself employs the word "discernment" to describe the process whereby a layman finds his way into priestly formation. For example, Pope Saint John Paul II's *Pastores dabo vobis* employs some form of the word "discern" about thirty times. However, by speaking about a Gospel discernment, this magisterial statement makes the point clearly that Christ associates himself with the process of discernment from the very beginning. "This Gospel discernment," says the papal exhortation, "is based on trust in the love of Jesus Christ, who always and tirelessly cares for his Church (cf. Eph. 5:29), he the Lord and Master, the key, the center and the purpose of the whole of human history."[3] In other words, the Church places discernment within the context of divine providence and its unique expression in Jesus

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[2] For an excellent essay, read M. J. Nicolas, *La grace d'être prêtre* (Paris, 1986).

[3] Pope John Paul II*, Pastores dabo vobis*, no. 10.

Christ. By so doing, she points to a grandness that extends far beyond the personal questions and introspections that a young man may entertain about whether God calls him to priesthood. I concluded my 2014 presentation (which has been made available to you) by enumerating some practical steps that a vocational prospect might take without his running the risk of self–absorption in a misguided form of discernment.

Thanks to another invitation from Father Benedict Croell, I am now able to provide a reprise of my 2014 talk on the grace to become a Dominican. Tonight, then, I wish to place a vocation to the Dominican Order within the grandness of God's plan for the salvation of the world. Although in order to explicate fully a vocation to the Dominicans requires appeal to the clerical state, what follows also applies to those who wish to embrace a vocation to the Cooperator Brotherhood. Like the clerical candidate, the Dominican Brother finds his identity in the image of Saint Dominic, who was a Catholic priest and whose mission in the Church remains unintelligible apart from those saving actions that the Church commits to her priests. As the name that the Order uses to designate a non–clerical brother suggests, Dominican Brothers cooperate with the priests in the pursuit of the overall mission of the Order. The "Fundamental Constitution" expresses this guiding purpose with great clarity:

> Made cooperators of the episcopal order by priestly ordination, we have as our special function the prophetic office by which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed everywhere both by word and example, with due consideration for the conditions of persons, times, and places so that faith is awakened or penetrates

more deeply all life in the building up of the body of Christ, which is perfected by the sacraments of faith.[4]

This description of the specific task that distinguishes Dominicans from other institutes of consecrated life provides a summary of the place that the Order holds in the divine plan. Dominicans did not invent themselves. They came into existence because of the special grace that animated Dominic Guzman during a period when, in the Languedoc region of medieval France, perverse ideologies had succeeded in corrupting the Catholic faith and causing great spiritual and material harm to everyday people.

2. Divine Providence and the Dominican Life

One best understands the unique character of the Dominican vocation by a consideration of the circumstances in which it arose. A convenient account of this history appears in a book, *Dominic, Or the Grace of the Word,* by the late Dominican historian, Father Guy Bedouelle.[5] We learn that a young Spanish priest, Dominic Guzman, while traveling through southern France, confronted Albigensian Catharism, a heretical sect with roots in the city of Albi. The medieval chronicles report a paradigmatic event that signals God's approbation of Saint Dominic's efforts to expose the errors of these Cathars, errors, moreover, that had succeeded in undermining both

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[4] *LCO*, "Fundamental Constitution," no. 5.

[5] Guy Bedouelle, O.P., *Dominic, or the Grace of the Word*, trans. Sister Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995). Citations in this text are taken from the new French edition by Paul–Bernard Hodel (see below).

truthful preaching and true sacraments. The dramatic episode happened among the people of the ancient Languedoc region of France whose capital was Toulouse. According to medieval practice, those witnessing a debate between Saint Dominic and certain prominent Cathars sought to test the veracity of each opposing side by appeal to the "judgement of God," that is, a trial by fire. So the bystanders started a bonfire and threw the books of each of the contending parties into the flames. After three tries, Saint Dominic's parchments emerged unscathed by the fire, whereas those of the Cathars were burnt up immediately.[6] From the start, Dominicans found themselves separating black from white in a world of grey.

Another dispute between Cathars and Catholics in the spring of 1207 led to the organization of "the Preaching of Jesus Christ," the proto–model for the Dominican Order. This exchange of theological arguments—dispute meant not so much quarrel as disputation—took place in a small town of the French Midi called Montreal, near the walled city of Carcassonne whose cathedral still shelters pillars that felt the brush of Saint Dominic's black and white habit. The Cathars advanced a sort of dualism in which spirit and matter warred against each other. To take one example: Cathars considered the marriage bed sinful (because more fleshly creatures emerged from it), whereas they encouraged suicide as a "sacrament," since souls were liberated from their prisons of flesh. Like with all deranged ideologies, the main spokespersons did not always practice what they preached. What may we conclude from these founding events? That

[6] Guy–Thomas Bedouelle, *Dominique, ou la grâce de la parole* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2015), pp. 88, 89.

the Order of Saint Dominic was conceived as an ecclesial instrument for the defense of the faith, to preach the truth of the faith continually (*semper*), against insidious agents bent on its deformation.[7] Note well that the disagreements in question should not be reduced to quibbles over arcane details of dogmas. The Cathars put into jeopardy basic goods of the human person.

Today defense of the faith, especially as it was practiced in the thirteenth century, evokes images that more likely provoke bewilderment than admiration. Popular culture and sometimes purposeful mischief place Saint Dominic on the stage of the Inquisition. Besides, an inclusive age shies away from projects that appear to distinguish people rather than to unite them. Our period clearly prefers shades of grey to black and white. The medieval Church, it is true, both combated and, through the agency of the civil government, punished those who departed culpably and seriously from the truth of the Catholic religion. Political arrangements, however, operate differently today. At the same time, the Church never abandons her defense of the Catholic religion. Dominicans still acknowledge that their foundational purpose involves providing a defense of Catholic truth. It would make no sense for a Dominican to take up a prophetic office in the service of error. Holy Preaching follows upon Holy Teaching.

When it comes to confronting relativist moral positions and wrongly constituted inclusive communities, Dominicans vigorously oppose secular propagandists. They prefer to remind people, in the words of one Vatican document, that "the truth possesses in itself a unifying force. It frees men from isolation and the oppositions in which they have been trapped by ignorance of

[7] Bedouelle, *Dominique*, p. 89.

the truth. And as it opens the way to God, it, at the same time, unites them to each other."[8] In other words, adherence to the truth does not bring about division; adherence to the truth constructs the only real form of unity that exists. Error, on the other hand, divides. The ultimate explanation as to why Dominicans hold truth and unity together returns us to the One God who measures the truth of all true things. For the preaching of Christian salvation, truth takes on a new manifestation and a special urgency. Only revealed truth communicates what is required for the salvation of the human race, what opens the way for every human being to enjoy beatific communion with God.

Most visitors to a Dominican priory soon discover the motto of the Dominicans: "Truth." *Veritas*. Our commitment to both study and defend the Truth stems from the very first encounters that Saint Dominic undertook and witnessed more than 800 years ago. It would be wrong to imagine that Dominicans think of themselves as crusaders. It would be better to consider the Order as a band of troubadours. The image requires an exercise of analogical thinking. Just as the medieval lyric poets sang about courtly love, especially, as it happens, in the Provençal region of France, so Dominicans use their gifts and talents to chant the marvels of divine love, of God's love for his creatures and creation. From the sources of divine revelation, scripture, tradition, and Magisterium, Dominicans obtain "knowledge of salvation" (see Lk 1:77).[9] However, this

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[8] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Donum Veritatis*, On the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian, no. 3.

[9] See *LCO*, nos. 79, 80.

message of salvation needs preachers in order to translate and communicate the substance of divine revelation and its significance for human lives. God arranged that the office of preaching would remain linked to the hierarchical structure of the Church so that someone divinely appointed would be responsible for oversight of the communication of the truth. Charismatic preaching untethered to any authority than that of the person who speaks leads to disintegration. Catholic preaching belongs first and foremost to Bishops. This explains why Dominicans are described as "cooperators of the episcopal order."[10] The Church needs preachers of truth for a very solid and unassailable reason. No one can discover God's plan for salvation on his or her own. Everything that the Church announces as belonging to the mystery of faith comes to her from on high. Divine revelation requires heralds of truth. The message of Christ requires troubadours. Men who will sing the providential mercies of the Lord forever. Men who fear receiving a judgement like this: "because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth" (Rev 4:16). Men who stand ready to distinguish black from white in a lukewarm world that escapes easily into grey.

Much secular education limits inquiry to rational inquiry. Students nowadays learn about religion as a product of history and culture. We all find ourselves looking at Catholic realities through a sociological lens. Weblogs? Some think what transpires at 487 Michigan Avenue a fit subject for scientific inquiry. No doubt the human sciences can throw light on the success of the Province of Saint Joseph. For example, in a world where inclusiveness flattens out the

[10] *LCO*, "Fundamental Constitution," no. 5.

differences that make people interesting, men in white habits stand out for their individuality. In a world where expediency governs every aspect of human life, Dominicans, who create leisure in order to study truths with no cash value, draw notice. In a world where venereal pleasure drives a considerable amount of human congress, young men vowed to chaste celibacy turn heads because of their commitment. To avoid the infelicitous expression, counter–cultural, one may opine that Dominican life occupies a prophetic place on the cultural map of the twenty–first century. This place, however, does not appear strange to God. Dominican life fits nicely into the plan of divine providence. In fact, only from the viewpoint of divine providence can we discover why God raised up Dominicans.

God's providence for his creatures expresses itself eminently in the Incarnation. The values that Dominicans live reflect the life of the Savior himself. Christ comes among the human race as a poor, chaste, and obedient man. Like the monk, the Dominican embodies these counsels that one finds displayed throughout the New Testament. Why do we call the evangelical counsels a sign of God's providence for the world? The answer is simple: each counsel provides a remedy for the most hurtful results of original sin. Poverty. Although Saint Francis of Assisi captured the title of "Il Poverello," Saint Dominic showed the same love of poverty as did his Italian contemporary. In fact, Saint Dominic was obliged to counter the Albigensian propaganda whereby they appealed to the poverty of the Apostles as a proof of their authenticity. The Cathars made a show of appearing poor. Dominic always wore shoes in public to demonstrate that going shoeless does not entitle people to create myths. Chastity. The Cathars abused chastity by preaching it as a control on what they considered the negative features of sexual intercourse,

such as children. Saint Dominic, who before his arrival in France lived consecrated chastity, taught the positive features of chastity. In a word, the chaste man prays and studies better than does the unchaste man. Celibate chastity also liberates the Dominican preacher from the obligations that marriage entails so that he can move about freely as the needs of the apostolate require. Obedience. The Cathars developed their own hierarchy and their own chain of command—every indication makes of the Albigensians a sectarian control movement. Saint Dominic showed that obedience provides the premier way to imitate the powerless Christ who was obedient even unto death on a cross (see Phil 2:8). To counter sectarian impulses, Dominic Guzman also taught that obedience binds Catholics everywhere to the See of Peter as a principle of worldwide unity. Obedience affords the first line of defense against fragmentation. These lifestyle choices configure the Dominican to the Person of Jesus Christ. As a follower of Saint Dominic, the configured Dominican places himself at the disposal of the Holy Preaching, the *Pradicatio Iesu Christi*.

To complete this picture of the place that the Dominicans hold in God's providential plan for the salvation of the world, consider another text from the "Fundamental Constitution." The paragraph deals with the means to achieve the Order's objectives.

> We also undertake as sharers of the apostolic mission the life of the Apostles in the form conceived by St. Dominic, living with one mind the common life, faithful in the profession of the evangelical counsels, fervent in the common

celebration of the liturgy, especially of the Eucharist and the divine office as well as other prayer, assiduous in study, and persevering in regular observance.[11]

Prayer, especially formal liturgical prayer, study, and a regular form of life completes the picture of how a Dominican lives out his providential vocation. Prayer, especially the Liturgy of the Hours and the Holy Mass, of course complement the fundamental commitment that a Dominican makes to the worship of God. In fact, one Dominican author has spoken about religious life in general as a living liturgy.[12] Since one of the effects of original sin leaves the intellect of man darkened, the remedy of study becomes a means of sanctification. Study provides an approach to the mysteries of the Christian religion that no other manner of entry can replace. The mystic may find inexpressible delight in the mystery of the Cross, but only the theologian can set down a coherent, though necessarily incomplete, explanation as to why Christ had to suffer on a cross. Regular observance points to those practices that ensure that the form of Dominican life achieves its actualization in a way that allows many to share a common dwelling. The observances prove effective means for placing checks on the remnants of concupiscence that leave no descendent of Adam untouched—Our Lady being the sole exception.

Dominican consecration should not be viewed as a functional expediency that makes Dominicans leaner and meaner agents of evangelization. The vows, made to God, and everything

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[11] "Fundamental Constitution," no. 4.

[12] Paul G. Hinnebusch, O.P. *Religious Life, A Living Liturgy* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1965).

else that Dominicans characteristically do, express worship. The vows put everything Dominicans take up under the virtue of religion. This theological point warrants due consideration. The worship of God does not qualify as an optional exercise of piety for the especially devout. Worship describes a first response of human persons as soon as they realize that everything that they possess comes from God. So parents teach their children to pray. In other words, rational creatures owe God worship. To fail to worship offends against the creaturely status of any human being. So the Church recognizes consecrated life as a legitimate expression of baptismal commitment. Dominicans daily aim to fulfill Christ's words to the Samaritan Woman: "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him" (Jn 4: 23).

The "Fundamental Constitution" completes its account of Dominican life by explaining how its various elements contribute to the Order's realizing her purpose.

> All these practices contribute not only to the glory of God and our sanctification, but serve directly the salvation of mankind, since they prepare harmoniously for preaching, furnish its incentive, form its character, and in turn are influenced by it. These elements are closely interconnected and carefully balanced, mutually enriching one another, so that in their synthesis the proper life of the Order is

established: a life in the fullest sense apostolic, in which preaching and teaching must proceed from an abundance of contemplation.[13]

It is a remarkable thing to learn that the Dominican charism developed out of the providential encounter between a traveling Spanish priest and a confused innkeeper. The story recounts that Saint Dominic stayed up all night talking with a layman intrigued by the Albigensian mythology, with the result that by daybreak, the innkeeper had returned to the Catholic fold.[14] Today this anonymous thirteenth–century innkeeper represents for Dominicans the world of the new evangelization. The incident illumines how the Dominican vocation serves the designs of divine providence.

3. Providence and Personal Choice

Although contemporary outlooks emphasize the idiosyncratic nature of choosing, Christians recognize that their choices must conform to the divine norm for all choosing. In his encyclical on moral theology, *Veritatis splendor*, Pope Saint John Paul II described Christian choosing as a *theonomy*, that is, as an action in which God and the human agent each fully acts. The Pope explains how philosophers describe this view of human freedom: "Others speak, and rightly so," says the Pope, "of theonomy, or participated theonomy, since man's free obedience to God's law effectively implies that human reason and human will participate in God's wisdom

[13] "Fundamental Constitution," no. 4.

[14] Bedouelle, *Dominique*, pp. 83, 84.

and providence."[15] Theonomy affords the Catholic and Dominican alternative to conceptions about human choosing that make of Christian life an agonizing affair. The fullest expression of moral agony appears in heteronomy. What does this false view of Christian living look like? "Obedience to God," explains the Pope, "is not, as some would believe, a heteronomy, as if the moral life were subject to the will of something all–powerful, absolute, extraneous to man and intolerant of his freedom."[16] Nietzsche not Saint Paul made Christian life a heteronomy.

The dominant motif of today's culture appears in the cry for moral autonomy. The Pope points out that this view, which finds many exponents in Western philosophy, especially since the seventeenth century, adversely affects Catholic living. He says: "These doctrines [that promote autonomy] would grant to individuals or social groups the right to determine what is good or evil. Human freedom would thus be able to 'create values' and would enjoy a primacy over truth, to the point that truth itself would be considered a creation of freedom. Freedom would thus lay claim to a moral autonomy which would actually amount to an absolute sovereignty."[17] In short, *Veritatis splendor* sets down a taxonomy of modern views of freedom. The right way to approach the choosing of a Dominican vocation proceeds neither as an act of autonomous willing nor of heteronomous imposition. Since, as *Veritatis splendor* underscores, "human reason and human will participate in God's wisdom and providence," the one seeking to

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[15] *Veritatis splendor*, no. 41.

[16] *Veritatis splendor*, no. 41.

[17] *Veritatis splendor*, no. 35.

enter the Dominicans should view his choice within the larger picture of God's providential governance of the world.[18] The aspirant must act theonomously.

Not every man can become a Dominican priest. In fact, according to the divine command, "be fruitful and multiply," spoken to Adam—the first divine command given to the human race—the burden of keeping the human race alive falls equally on the shoulders of all men and women. One hardly needs to observe that this divine command and its normative character for heterosexual intercourse threatens some contemporary social movements. The Church, however, sees "in transmitting the gift of human life: 'God blessed them, and God said to them, 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen 1:27)" a blessing not a burden for the human race.[19] In any event, we cannot replicate the Cathars' mistake and suggest that everyone should abstain from legitimate sexual intercourse. At the same time, only Christ and his way of life justify the choice of chaste celibacy by that man chosen to imitate him.

The choice to forego natural paternity frees a man to take on a spiritual paternity. No intermediate position exists. The Church does not bless eunuchs. Still, those born of woman require pastoral care. Spiritual fatherhood returns us to the theme of divine providence and the Dominican vocation. One sees the analogy easily: Just as the human seed remains indispensable for conceiving a child, so the seed of the Word of God remains indispensable for making saints. The choice to take on the black and white in a world of grey does not enroll a young man in a

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[18] *Veritatis splendor*, no. 41.

[19] *Familiaris consortio*, no. 28.

militia dedicated exclusively to chasing down erroneous opinions and theories. The providential choice to seek admission to the Dominican Order challenges one to prepare for spiritual fatherhood. Think of Saint Dominic and the Albigensian innkeeper. There you see an example of Dominican accompaniment, a patient, presumably loving, and artful engagement with the truth —it is reported that Saint Dominic began by complementing his tavern fare. If the thought of being a troubadour of truth exhilarates you, then embrace the grace and run with it.

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