

THE PILLARS OF DOMINICAN LIFE

DOMINICAN SPIRITUALITY FOR THE LAITY

by Gregory Anderson, O.P., revised by

Bartholomew de la Torre, O.P.

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III. STUDY

In our last chapter we promised to consider study, which may have caused some apprehension for those of you who have not been in a classroom for years and have no desire to go back into one. But we are not thinking of study in that sense. Actually, we are talking about something you do all the time. For example, a person who is interested in cooking will pore over cook books looking for recipes that will be interesting and delicious as well as within the range of his or her time available and culinary skills. A person using a computer will carefully go through the manual of the program he or she is using to find out what can be done with it. You may have to consult it many times when you run into new and unexpected problems. You may even be reduced to calling the program's technical support to ask for help. Those who are planning a vacation will look through travel brochures to decide on a destination that will be both enjoyable and within their means. The list could go on and on but the point is that even for the ordinary actions of life we will do a certain amount of study and preparation so that we can get the best out of what is available to us.

We say that people who do not do that sort of thing are rowing with one oar, or that the elevator has not gone all the way to the top floor, or some such expression that indicates they do not have good sense. How much truer this is for those of us who say we want to be contemplatives, or to bring truth to others. How can you be a contemplative when you have nothing to contemplate, or give truth to others when you do not know it yourself? If we are willing to do some study and preparation to achieve mundane goals, how much more eager should we be to learn what will lead us to such sublime ones?

This does not mean that you have to enroll in some theological institution to get a degree in theology, or to sign up for summer or night courses at some Catholic institution. It does mean, though, that you should be thoroughly familiar with the basic truths of your faith. If you had the advantage of twelve years of a good, solid Catholic education you may think you know it all. But you would be surprised at how much you have forgotten of what you learned or were supposed to have learned. It would not hurt at all to brush up on your knowledge of the faith by reading the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or some basic work of Catholic theology.

You should also try to deepen your understanding of the Scriptures, for, after all, they are the Word of God. And this is not too hard to do. You can choose a brief passage --- particularly from the Gospels and the letters of St. Paul --- and reflect prayerfully on its meaning. If you have difficulty finding one, your *Liturgy of the Hours* is full of them. In addition, you should also learn something about the background, purpose and message of the various books of the Bible. One of the easiest places to get this information is by reading the introductions and notes you will find in a Catholic Bible. They are brief and have been written by top-notch Catholic scholars. [A note of caution from Fr. Bart: though the notes at the bottom of the pages in the *New American Bible* are good, the introductions at the beginning of the books must be read with caution because often their explanations are incompatible with Divine inspiration.]

A solid knowledge of the Word of God will not only be a well-spring of your own spiritual growth, but will help you respond intelligently to the fundamentalists we run into so often these days. Let me give you a warning about them. They will quote Bible verses at you one after another until you are dizzy. Your reaction may be, "These people know so much about the Bible." Do not be overawed or impressed with them. It does not mean that they know the Bible at all. It merely means that they have memorized a lot of Bible verses. But they do not know the context of those verses at all. They pick and choose the ones that will prove their own point --- which is usually anti-Catholic. This is a misuse of Scripture. [In fact, the word *heresy* is Greek for "picking and choosing", as opposed to *Catholic*, which is Greek for "the whole thing", namely all of the inspired truths and not just the one we pick and choose according to our own judgment, which, as St. Thomas teaches, means we do not believe in God but in ourselves.]

The best way to handle those people is to smile sweetly and say, "How beautiful! Now, what is the verse before that?" Ninety times out of a hundred, they will not know it. Pin them down and try to make them put the verse they have quoted into its context. Of course, it helps if you know what that context is.

But reading is not the only way we study and learn. St. Thomas includes listening as well. You have your chapter talks by the chaplain or others, sermons at the Masses you attend, and talks that are given on various subjects in your parish or other places. There are also Catholic radio talks plus all sorts of resources on Internet, and on and on the list could go. We are living in an age of recordings. There are some marvelous audio and video tapes available that can be very helpful in our learning and study.

This reading and listening is not just a one-shot affair. You just do not read the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and let it go at that. No, you should be eager to learn more and more. It is a life-long process. For example, every Dominican priest has had seven years of intense study but most have never stopped studying and never stopped learning during all the years since their ordination. We do not deserve any particular credit for this because this is what a Dominican is supposed to do. It is only logical to conclude that anyone who is interested in fulfilling his or her vocation as a Dominican will do this sort of thing almost naturally.

I include the Dominican Laity in this assessment. It is just human nature that the more you know, the more you want to know. These insights you gain into your faith will be so wonderful that you will be eager to gain more. Oh, there will be times when it seems as though you have run into a stone wall and you are getting nowhere. In such cases, keep in mind that you have the gift of understanding, the

second Gift of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to penetrate into the deeper meanings of the truths of our faith. Remember, all you have to do is to pray for an increase of it, and the Holy Spirit will give you insight and enlightenment.

You will also want to learn more about the Dominican Order. Here, of course, you will want to go beyond reading the lives of St. Dominic that are available. You will also want to read William A. Hinebusch's *A Brief History of the Dominican Order* and Benedict Ashley's *The Dominicans*. but you will become acquainted with your brothers and sisters who are the saints, blessed and holy members of the Order. In addition, there are a number of other excellent books that will be coming out in the future, so you have a lot to look forward to in the years ahead.

What I have been talking about is not beyond the range of the average, ordinary, intelligent person, which would include all of you. Those of you whose education, background and IQ level are above normal have a tremendous wealth of material available to you as well. But even those who are in neither of those categories can be accommodated and satisfied. Remember St. Thomas' words:

Some who have sanctifying grace may suffer dullness of mind with regard to things that are not necessary for salvation; but with regard to those that are necessary for salvation, they are sufficiently instructed by the Holy Spirit, according to 1 Jn. 2:27, "His anointing teaches you about everything." (II, II, q. 8, art. 4, ans. to obj. 1)

But let us face it, even the brightest of us have a certain amount of dullness in regard to revealed truth. All of us desperately need the instruction of the Holy Spirit. So, no one is left out in this life-long process of learning that is an essential part of Dominican life. It is, indeed, one of its pillars. As I said at the beginning, if you are serious about being contemplatives and the bearers of the torch of truth to the world you live in, then you will want to study and learn more and more. You will find that your Dominican vocation will give you the recipe for happiness, both now and forever. It will provide the manual for fulfilling your call from God which you can consult over and over again and it will be better than any travel brochure ever published to guide you to your destination, where, in union with all your brothers and sisters in St. Dominic, under the mantle of Mary, you will enjoy the eternal vision of God in heaven.