

# Dominicans as *Defensores fidei*

fr. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P. - 2020-21 Val McInnes Academic Chairholder  
Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas - 15 May 2021 at 5PM

If we leave aside the question of the beard and turban, what difference is there between a member of the Afghan mujahideen and a Dominican from the Angelicum? After all, both define themselves as ‘warriors for the faith’. The liturgy of the Order of Preachers attests that the ‘defence of the Catholic faith’ is an essential dimension of the Dominican vocation. Thus, in the Prayer over the Offerings from the Mass in honour of St Dominic, we ask God: ‘Through the power of this great sacrifice, strengthen by the protection of your grace those who champion the faith (*fidei propugnatores* = that is, literally, the fighters for the faith)’, and the Preface insists: "Dominic, inflamed with zeal for the salvation of souls, *fidei pugiles ad salvandas gentes instituit*, i.e. raised up champions of the faith to save the nations" (the old English liturgical translation unfortunately omitted this phrase). And many Dominican saints are celebrated for having defended the faith. This is the case with St Pius V, whom providence raised up ‘*ad fidem tuendam*’, says the Opening Prayer, ‘that the faith might be safeguarded.’ This is a rather military terminology, not to say bellicose. So what is the difference between the Dominicans and the Mujahideen? It lies entirely in the nature, aims and, consequently, the ‘style’ and means of this combat or struggle of faith. This will be the theme of today’s conference, which aims at sharing with you something of the ideal which animates the Dominicans of the Angelicum.

What is this ‘combat of faith’? In its first sense, this phrase designates the existential and vital struggle that each of us must wage in our innermost being, where life and death, light and darkness, confront each other in a formidable duel. From the dark part of ourselves rise evil voices of disbelief and despair: "Brief and troubled is our lifetime [...] For by mere chance were we born, and hereafter we shall be as though we had not been [...]. Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things that are here" (Wisdom 2, 1-2. 6). What pitiful wisdom! How can I live without a reason to live? Whatever someone does to stifle these ultimate questions within himself, man remains a metaphysical animal who must take a stand on the meaning of life. The philosopher Rémi Brague has observed how the simple fact of passing on life to the next generation is a sign that we know, deep down, that life is a good thing and worth living and communicating. This fundamental "yes" to life, which is good because it has meaning, is ultimately a ‘yes’ to God, a ‘yes’ to that *Logos*, to that primary Reason, which envelops the cosmos and history. However, this ‘yes’ is never acquired once and for all. It is a

victory that must be fought for every day against the temptation of incredulity and nihilism. On the banks of the river Jabbok, the patriarch Jacob was left alone - one is always alone when faced with the fundamental choices of life - and for a whole night he wrestled with a mysterious figure. When dawn broke, he emerged victorious, though forever wounded. 'I will not let you go until you bless me.' (Gen. 32:27) Jacob fought the good fight of faith and God blessed him.

That said, however personal it may be, this struggle also involves the community of believers, that is to say the Church. And the ecclesial mission of the Dominicans is precisely to accompany this intimate struggle. This mission is itself a struggle, the apostolic struggle for the transmission of the faith, in view, therefore, of the salvation of souls, since it is through faith in Jesus Christ that every human being is saved. More precisely, this apostolic combat consists in removing the obstacles that oppose the personal encounter of each person with Jesus Christ. Two conditions are necessary for this encounter to take place. They correspond to the two dimensions, objective and subjective, of faith. On the objective level, faith designates a message, a teaching, a good news, which comes from God and leads to God. This teaching is addressed to the intellect of every human being in order to open a new horizon to his existence. The apostolic struggle for faith has as its goal that this message be proposed to each person in an authentic way. But - this is the second dimension of faith - it is not enough for a transmitter to emit a message, I must also have a receiver, a decoder. On the subjective level, faith, the virtue of faith, designates this capacity that God gives us to accept his Word as the truth that saves us. The struggle for faith consists here in clearing the ground to put in place conditions favorable to this acceptance. Let us take up these two points again.

The first obstacle to the happy outcome of a meeting is a mistake about the person. The same patriarch Jacob, we are told in Chapter 29 of Genesis, was overjoyed to have finally obtained the hand of the seductive Rachel, but was extremely unhappy the day after his wedding, in the harsh light of day, to discover Rachel's elder sister, the frightful Leah, in the marriage bed (one of the collateral effects of the veil). For faith to be possible, therefore, the Word of God itself must be proposed for our adherence, a "controlled appellation" and not a contraband commodity. For, under the guise of the Word of God, we are experts in selling our philosophical elucidations or our human ideologies. The ancients called this sleight of hand heresy. It looks like faith, it tastes vaguely like faith, but it is not faith. In fact, God takes a risk in entrusting his Word to human beings, because our spontaneous tendency is to accommodate it to our taste. Therefore, to ensure that we are truly dealing with the Word of God in all its DNA purity and not with some suspect GMO, Jesus Christ promised his Church the assistance of the Spirit of truth (Jn 16:13) so that she would keep pure and intact, 'the faith that was once for all handed down to the saints' (Jude 3). Just as our contemporaries are legitimately concerned about leaving a viable planet to future generations, so the Church has always been careful

to pass on unaltered what she has received from Christ. "O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you" (1 Tim. 6:20), St Paul asks his disciple. Traceability is guaranteed. This mission is that of the whole Church, which is not an undifferentiated whole but a structured community. All believers, insofar as they participate in the depths of the life of the Church, are endowed with an instinct of faith, the *sensus fidei*. It is a kind of 'nose' or 'sixth sense', refined by their familiarity with the living Christ within them, which enables them to discern whether or not a teaching is in conformity with the Catholic faith in which they already live. This is why the sheep instinctively 'will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers.' (Jn 10:5) But the pastors, the bishops, have also received, by virtue of their office, a special charism of truth to guarantee the purity of doctrine. They are, according to Vatican II, 'authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach to the people committed to them the faith they must believe and put into practice [...], vigilantly warding off any errors that threaten their flock.' Indeed, the defence of truth is inseparable from the fight against error.

For error is a very profound evil. It hurts the person's ability to know, which is the very root and condition of free and responsible action. To make the right decisions, I need to have good information. Otherwise, I'm heading into the wall. This is why fighting error is an eminent service to believers. To take a gospel image, pastors must ensure that children who ask for bread - the substantial bread of the Word, the only bread that nourishes - are not given an indigestible stone (Mt. 7:9-10). They must make sure that the pastures where the Lord's sheep graze do not conceal a poisonous plant or some hallucinogenic mushroom. Thus, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that 'it is this Magisterium's task to preserve God's people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error. Thus, the pastoral duty of the Magisterium is aimed at seeing to it that the People of God abides in the truth that liberates.' (#890).

Now the friars of the Order of Preachers, otherwise known as Dominicans, participate by profession in this teaching mission (*munus docendi*) of the bishops. When, in 1215, the bishop of Toulouse welcomed Saint Dominic and his brothers, he instituted them 'as preachers [...], in order to extirpate the corruption of heresy, to drive out vices, to teach the rule of faith and to inculcate in men sound morals.' In doing so, he was simply applying the recommendations of the great medieval Council of Lateran IV (1215): the bishops should preach in person or have someone preach for them. St Dominic and his brothers were therefore entrusted, as co-workers (*coadjutores et cooperatores*, says Lateran IV), with a participation in the teaching function (*munus docendi*) of the bishops, which included the defence and explanation of the Catholic faith.

But the assistance promised to the Church in this area is not magic. The action of the Holy Spirit to bring to light the truth of the faith and to remove errors does not fall from heaven afterwards

to validate or invalidate a purely human process. No, this assistance is part of a complex ecclesial process that the Spirit initiates, accompanies, corrects and guides from within. Those who have the mission of authentically transmitting the faith are therefore not exempt from taking up all the human means at their disposal to accomplish this task in the best possible way. The first of these means is study. We understand why study is consubstantial with the Dominican vocation. It is by immersing himself in the Word of God and in the documents of Tradition that the theologian becomes capable of collaborating effectively in the discernment of what is or is not in conformity with the apostolic faith.

This study involves all the resources of reason, but it is also a spiritual exercise. In theology, personal dispositions are not an option, but are epistemologically essential. One does not study the mystery of the Trinity or the terrible question of evil as one studies the reproduction of beetles or the rules of geometry. The theologian must keep, through prayer and the practice of Christian life in community, a living contact with the very sources of Revelation; he must be attentive to the *sensus fidelium*, to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches; he must cultivate a true docility to the teaching given by the Magisterium... He must above all take care to purify his deepest intention, for the defence of truth is a particularly propitious terrain for the wiles of our insatiable will to power. The desire to win, to 'be right', that is to say, to annex the truth to our projects of self-promotion, always threatens to subvert the service of the truth.

Ensuring the purity of faith is therefore the first aspect of the struggle of faith. There is a second. The agronomist does not watch over the quality of the seeds to keep them under a bell-cover. He puts them into circulation so that they may be sown and bear fruit, each according to its kind. In the same way, the Church preserves the purity of the deposit of faith with such care only so as to allow it to be received personally by every human being and to bear fruit in him. This is the second aspect of faith, faith as an interior process by which I welcome the God who gives himself to me, and I give myself to him as the Lord and 'Master of my life' (Sir. 23:1). Now, in view of this secret alchemy that grace works in the most intimate part of the heart, the 'defender of faith' finds himself extremely helpless. He stands on the threshold, on the outside. It is Jesus himself who knocks at the door and enters (Rev. 3:20). Alone. 'The one who has the bride is the bridegroom' (Jn 3:29). We are only the friends of the bridegroom. Yet this same Jesus, according to the Gospel, sent his disciples 'ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit' (Lk. 10:1). It is up to us, therefore, to make the preparations so that, according to his ardent desire, Jesus can celebrate the Passover in every human being (cf. Mk14:12). That is to say, it is up to us to prepare minds and hearts so that every person can welcome Christ as his Lord and God.

As such, we are God's authentic co-workers, instruments of his grace. As you know, for St Thomas Aquinas, God's power is manifested above all in his generosity. God, because he is the

fullness of Being and therefore the Source of all being, generously communicates to creatures not only a very real existence but also real capacities for action. He does not create nebulous ectoplasms but autonomous subjects capable of acting on themselves and on each other. Unlike the 'powerful' of this world, God does not need to prove that he exists by belittling others and monopolizing all activity. On the contrary, he manifests his power all the better if he associates creatures, each according to its nature, with the government of the universe, that is to say with the action by which he leads all things towards their fulfilment. In this perspective, at the end of the First Part of the *Summa Theologiae*, the Angelic Doctor studies the various ways in which God governs - either directly or through the mediation of creatures - the various types of beings and especially the human person.

First of all, he explains that God (and God alone) is present and active in the most intimate part of myself, at the very heart of my most personal activity. The otherness of God is not like the otherness of the creature. God is not a counterpart for me, as another created person can be, whose direct action on my thought or on my freedom could only be an intrusion, a kind of violation of my intimacy. No, God is the radical and permanent Cause of my being and of my action. He is therefore, according to the beautiful formula of Saint Augustine, more intimate to me than I am to myself (*Deus intimior intimo meo*). God is at home with me, where, without any violence, he 'works in me both to desire and to work, for his good purpose' (Phil. 2:13).

On the other hand, no creature has direct access to the intimacy of my person. Its action can only be peripheral. It involves an action on the external conditioning of the spiritual life. Thus, the angel, however pure a spirit he may be, can only exert an influence on my intellect and my will by acting on the psychosomatic processes which, without ever determining it, condition their activity. As for the action of one human being on another, it is even more limited. St Thomas focuses on the notable case of education and teaching. The teacher, he explains, communicates to the disciple neither the capacity to think (the latter possesses it by nature), nor the ideas by which he apprehends reality and which he must conceive, 'give birth to', himself. The master is content to manipulate external signs - words, images, examples - in such a way as to put the disciple on the track of the truth. He acts as a sort of catalyst, but if the light of true knowledge is to shine, it will come from within the mind of the disciple.

What applies to any teacher applies all the more to the preacher. No creature can give faith to anyone. First, because faith is a grace that can only come from God. Secondly, because it is a vital act which springs from the depths of each person's freedom. Only the interior Master, that is to say Christ, the Word of God, can make the words that resonate on the outside become words of life in me. It remains that the external master, the preacher, must deploy all the resources of his art to present the teaching in a way that favours the blossoming and growth of faith in his listener.

To do this, he must, in particular, build bridges between the mental universe of his interlocutor and Christian doctrine. In other words, he must work to make Christian doctrine audible, understandable and desirable in a given cultural and intellectual context. Like that delicious animal, the frog (it is a froggy who speaks!), the theologian is an amphibious animal who lives at the confluence of two universes, that of faith and that of the surrounding culture. An essential part of his work consists in understanding the culture in which we are immersed - its strong tendencies, its historical genesis, its social conditioning... - and in identifying in it what favours the act of faith and what makes it more difficult. For unbelief is not always ill will. Whatever the deep dispositions of the heart, the impossibility of explicitly believing is often induced by a cultural context that makes the message of faith highly improbable, because it is out of step with the widely diffused structures of thought that condition our vision of the world. For example, the mythology that has been grafted onto scientific theories of the evolution of species objectively blocks access to a conception of humanity that is open to the spiritual. Or again, the way in which the principles of liberal democracy, valid in the political order, have been unduly extended to the moral order makes it very difficult to conceive of obedience to a truth that comes from elsewhere... It is therefore important to understand these intellectual structures, their history, and to show both their truth and their limits.

To this struggle to make faith possible by clearing the cultural terrain, the theologian adds another type of action that is common to him and all other Christians. Indeed, if faith is formally an act of the intellect, this act engages more widely all the dimensions of the person. The preparatory work done on the intellectual level is therefore necessary but insufficient. It must be accompanied by preparatory work that addresses the 'heart'. There, the witness of charity intervenes. There, even more, prayer intervenes, which is addressed to the One who alone can act in the most intimate part of the heart in order to turn hearts towards him.

Fighting for the faith is therefore inseparable from a certain 'style' of life, since there must be coherence between the content of the message and the way of communicating it. A liturgical hymn from the end of the thirteenth century says that Saint Dominic 'went naked to face his enemies, supported only by the grace of Christ (*Nudus occurrens hostibus / Christi suffultus gratia*)'. Faced with the Cathar peril, Dominic made a decisive choice: the word of preaching rather than the weapons of the crusade. Already in the Old Testament, in order to confront the terrible Goliath, all clad in iron, the young David had refused the heavy armour of King Saul (1 Sam. 17). He was content with his slingshot and five smooth stones, which, according to tradition, refer to the five books of the Law of Moses. This is because, as Saint Paul declares, 'the weapons of our battle are not of the flesh' (2 Cor. 10:4). He thus rejects not only the use of physical coercion, but also the more subtle forms of violence that are often parasitic on our human relationships: the tricks of seduction and emotional blackmail,

social pressures, 'the wisdom of language' (1 Cor. 1:17), that is, rhetorical manipulation, or even the formidable power of institutionalized knowledge (we are clad in diplomas like armour!)... All this, in which a man usually puts his trust, Saint Paul renounced in order not to betray the very object of his preaching: the *logos tou staurou*, the message, the folly, of the Cross (1 Cor. 1:18). Is it not through the radical renunciation of all power other than the force of truth and the radiance of charity that Jesus establishes his Kingdom?

The preaching of the Christian faith has all the less need of these subterfuges, since it has in the person it wants to invest a choice ally, an infiltrator, a fifth column: the desire to know the truth, the ultimate truth, a desire that is hidden in the depths of the human spirit. This is why the preacher's purpose is not to impose the truth of the Gospel from the outside, but to serve the deep desire of man by showing him what he is already groping for. When a person arrives at the act of faith, it is a 'recognition' that takes place: 'Truly, the LORD is in this place and I did not know it!' (Gen. 28:16). He is the one who was waiting for me and whom I was secretly awaiting.

Since the mind is thus made for truth, it follows, according to Vatican II, that 'the truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth' (*Dignitatis humanae*, n. 1). From this are deduced the methods of the struggle for faith: "Truth is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth" (*ibid.*, n. 3). It is in this spirit that the Dominicans of the Angelicum understand the struggle of faith, with which they wholeheartedly associate all those who help them in their mission, whether by their financial support, their friendship or their prayer.