

Mary: Contemplation and Preaching of the Word

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« I have seen wonders! ». This exclamation of Blessed John-Joseph Lataste following his first experience of preaching to the inmates of the Cadillac prison, could serve as an adequate introduction to this new year of preparation for the Order's Jubilee. In fact, the theme for this year is: « *May it be done to me according to your word (Lk 1, 38)* ». *Mary: contemplation and preaching of the Word.*

During this year of the novena, how can we be guided by the exclamation of the apostle of prisons? He had just preached in one of the worst places of dereliction; he had addressed women spoiled by life and by the serious acts of which they are guilty, worn by the conditions of their detention, crushed by the absence of a possible future. Nevertheless, having preached the Word of Light and Truth in this place of the worst dereliction, he has seen wonders. He contemplated the work of the Word he was preaching, the work of the mercy of the One who « loved us in friendship and perfect friendship ». He was dazzled in discovering the strength of women ostracized by male society as they experienced their re-creation in the image of the humanity of Christ while receiving the Word of mercy. Contemplation!

This evocation clearly illustrates that contemplation and preaching of the Word together constitute the heart of the life and of the mission of the Order of Preachers. It is not about creating opposition between the one and the other as if sisters and brothers incessantly had to attempt to establish, through their own wisdom, a fragile balance between the active ministry of preaching and a withdrawal into the silence of contemplation. We also recall the enlightened comment of Master Eckhart about the Gospel of Martha and Mary. Being thoroughly and at once both contemplation and preaching, the ministry of the Preachers places them in the school of Mary when, in welcoming the angel's message, she agreed to give birth to Jesus, « the Lord saves » (Mt 1, 21). After relating the story of Jesus amidst the doctors in the temple, the evangelist Saint Luke tells us that « his mother kept all these things in her heart » (Lk 2, 51). In welcoming the Word of mercy and life, Mary shows us the path of a « contemplative humanity ».

I borrow this expression from the Archbishop of Canterbury who, in his address to the Synod of bishops on October 9, 2012, showed how contemplation is at the heart of evangelization: « evangelization, whether old or new, must be anchored in the deep certainty that we have a human destiny which distinguishes us and that we must show and share with the world ». He went on: « The fact of being fully human means to be re-created

in the image of Christ's humanity; and this humanity is the perfect human "translation" of the relation of the eternal Son and the eternal Father; a relation based on the gift of oneself in love and adoration, a torrent of life toward the Other. Thus, the humanity in which we grow with the Spirit, the humanity we attempt to share with the world as the fruit of the redemptive work of Christ, is a contemplative humanity ». « Study and adoration », these are the two features of the Order's tradition that Benedict XVI puts forward to express how the Order of Preachers is called to take part in the new evangelization. Allow me to quote Rowan Williams again: « Saint Edith Stein observed that we begin to understand theology when we see God as the "First Theologian", the first one to speak to us about the reality of divine life since "all we say about God presupposes that it is God Himself who speaks"; similarly, we can say that we begin to understand contemplation when we see God as the first contemplative, the eternal paradigm of this uninterested attention paid to the Other, who does not bring death, rather life. All contemplation of God presupposes the absorbed and happy knowledge that God has of Himself and the contemplation of Himself in Trinitarian life ».

As we are invited to focus our attention on contemplation at this stage of the preparation for the Order's Jubilee, we are led to the school of Mary meditating in her heart the mystery of her Son, to the heart of the consecration of our life to the Word, « The true light, which enlightens everyone, coming into the world » (Jn 1, 9). Wherever there is a question of humanity, unity and salvation. Of humanity, since beyond all efforts we make in the practice of contemplation, the latter is in fact the path on which we wish to expose our own humanity to be seized and, by the grace of God, transformed by the unfathomable mystery of the revelation of the Son of God to humanity. And how we would love for this to be translated more every day into the concrete reality of our fraternal relations, into our perception of others and of the world! Of unity, since far from being simply defined by a "reserved" space and time, contemplation invites us to commit all our being and our time to this face to face (« those who look to Him will shine ») that exposes us to the silent gaze of God who teaches love and justice, humility and repentance, the action of grace and hope. Can this unified heart keep us from the agitation and dispersion that often threaten our endeavours for evangelization? Of salvation, when, led by the elusive presence of God who comes and forgives as in the prodigal son in the Gospel, we lack the words to ask him to give us life once again. How can we not incessantly go back to that first day when, by consecrating our life to preaching, we implored the grace of mercy?

« Contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere »... This motto of the Order, as we know, does not describe two sequential steps in the ministry of evangelization. We do not behave in contemplation as we would when we go to the market to acquire what we can later distribute. Certainly, this motto well indicates that there can be no preaching without contemplation. However, in doing so, it indicates that evangelization proceeds from contemplation while, at the same time, the latter is somehow the most precious invitation

(the gift) that evangelization can offer to humanity, thereby opening with it and through it a path for the desire for Truth. This desire is the echo of that same desire of the One who comes to love us with friendship, to propose to humanity an alliance of friendship; this alliance that is « played » in each of us through the commitment of His Word to ours, or, rather, the giving of our word to listen to His: « May it be done to me according to your word »! This simple expression shows how everybody's life can be rooted in the absolute trust in God's Word who promises and achieves the alliance of friendship, and in the tireless watch that searches, at the heart of this alliance, the mystery of friendship in God who is the ultimate Truth.

God speaks to the world and, in order to discover this unprecedented reality, contemplation allows us to be inhabited firstly by his silent presence that enables our hearts to hear the Word He addresses to the world and to each one. We can certainly describe the « means » that can place us in this contemplative attitude. However, it is even more important to pay attention to the paths along which the Order's tradition leads us. And on these different paths, the Word of God – hearing it, celebrating it, meditating on it, and studying it – is central. The Word of God is central in the hearing of it that fraternal life makes possible. Often, we run the risk of reducing the life among brothers or sisters to its concrete and practical aspects – often very happy but sometimes burdened by the fragility of our humanity – while our brothers and sisters are, in the first place, given to us as carriers of this Word, as scholars of the Word working in them and through them. It is central in celebration; not as a task to be performed but as the rhythm of our celebration of God's Presence in order to receive, through prayer with others, our own capacity to pray and contemplate. It is central in the meditation of *Lectio Divina*, which today could take on greater significance than it has among us so as to truly place the « centrality » of the Word at the heart of our life. At the school of Thomas, it is central in study, since the work of reason is one of the occasions that invites us to give the Word to the One who is the « first theologian » and, therefore, will lead us to recognize Him as the « first contemplative » and to be taught by Him.

« I have seen wonders »! The experience of such a vision one day led Thomas of Aquinas to relativise all the theological science he had formulated. Not because this intellectual work was not important, but because Thomas wished for it to be effaced before the adoration of the Christ, directing his gaze on humanity. It is also the experience of Blessed John-Joseph Lataste when he was shocked to see on the inmates' raised faces the reflection of the look of mercy God directed onto them. For the one as for the other, the look of contemplation toward God is a response to God, who first turns his gaze towards humanity and towards each of us: « He has looked on his lowly servant ». This look that expresses the unprecedented love of God for his creature, which carries the latter into existence, also carries the creature continuously in his work of creation and animates him through the mystery of Trinity. Contemplation is concerned with the gaze, with the purification of the

gaze which allows itself to be inhabited by the mysterious light of the gaze of God. We are often impressed by the clarity of perception of contemplatives: by turning their gaze inwards towards God, they encounter the gaze of God towards humanity which enlightens their own gaze at others and at the world. Thus, human words are silenced so that, in the silence of a feeble whisper, the Word of life may be heard. Silence, the father of preachers...

God speaks to the world and addresses each one. During the Annunciation, Mary is immersed in this experience. Chosen among women, she is like the figure of the people as a whole, of its expectation of God as well as of its conviction that the God of the promise acts in human history. She shows no surprise at the news that God wishes to give a Saviour to humanity, since that is her hope and the hope of her people. She does not doubt that this Saviour comes taking our humanity to himself, seeming rather to welcome this announcement as written into the logic of the promise. The question she raises deals with what concerns and involves her, « a humble young girl », in this fulfilment. How will it be done? « The Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Almighty... ». Is that not the beginning of the time of contemplation? There is a time to address God and a time to enter into the silence in which He addresses us, or rather a time when he displays in us the mystery of his Presence. To the question « how do I contemplate? » a nun answers as follows: « By asking the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit to come and live in me, to love itself in me, to nourish me with its love». Contemplation is the seizing of our entire being by the mystery of this love which simultaneously acts in the world and establishes its home within us. Since that moment, preaching is not a transcription into human words of a truth seized by the intellect ; it aims rather at echoing the seizing, in one and the same movement, of intellect and heart by a Presence which in addressing us, addresses the world; that is to say, by giving itself.

Thus, the primary objective of preaching is to invite people to welcome this Presence whose grace outruns all the words of the preacher.

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