

REVIVING AN ORDER OF PREACHERS

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In 1215 Dominic moved into a house with six followers, his heart set on preaching well. According to the historians, Dominic had seen firsthand some poor ministry work, and he was certain that it could be done better. A few years earlier, while on Spanish Royal business in Denmark, Dominic encountered a heretical gnostic group and some lackluster teaching, which was supposed to draw them back to orthodox Christianity. There had to be a better way to address the heresy.

What grew out of Dominic's desire for great preaching was the Order of Preachers, or Dominicans. Dominic's plan was simple: begin living by the Rule of Augustine; get excellent training at universities; travel and preach.



By 1216 Dominic had secured the official approval of Pope Honorius III, and the order of Black Friars (so named from the distinctive black cloak they wore over their white habit) began to spread. The papal bulls issued by Honorius III gave permission to the Dominicans to study and preach universally. This expression of confidence in the study of God's Word and the study of the times in which the preacher lived – in order to bring the two together in preaching – became the foundation of the Order of Preachers.

Dominic had two core strategies in his plan to make the most of his universal authorization to preach the gospel of Jesus and combat heresy. He sent rookie preachers off to be trained and he focused attention on the cities

Training Preachers: a profession or a craft?

Dominic was prepared to adjust the rule of life for those in his religious order, so that they could attend training to improve their knowledge. It was no use sending ill-equipped preachers to combat heresy. Dominic desired that every member of his newly founded order would be trained in handling theology and Scripture.

It is possible to see the preaching work of a pastor or priest in this professional framework. We can see how specific skills and knowledge, gained in tertiary education, may usefully equip those entrusted with the task of preserving the teaching of the apostles. There is room for preachers to be properly prepared to contend for the faith. I would even suggest that

priests and pastors who preach ought to continue developing their knowledge and skills – they are in an order of preachers, by virtue of their ordination vows.

However, I have often argued that the art of preaching is more like a craft. Just as the carpenter is an apprentice, who repeats over and over again the craftsmanship of making beauty out of wood, so the preacher grows in ability by the repetition of the craft of oratory.

It may help us to train and develop preachers if we apprenticed them, particularly with an eye on their craftsmanship. New preachers often mimic those they listen to and respect, and this seems to be exactly how skill in a craft is developed. The new preacher slowly acquires their own preaching voice, their own style and their command of the rhetorical tools of oratory. We could make all of this more conscious by placing new preachers under the care of those more experienced in the craft of preaching.

Pay attention to the cities

While other religious orders withdrew to solitude, high in mountains or nestled in valleys, Dominic intended his Order of Preachers to be based in cities. Dominic could see that his desire for excellent preaching to combat heresy needed to focus on the cities.

One reason why this may be so, is that cities in Europe were growing significantly in population and becoming centres for education. Dominic was convinced that his Religious order needed to be out amongst the people, connected to the institutions for learning, making their living from their preaching. The members of the Dominican order needed to understand what was being taught by the intellectuals of the cities in order to engage with their thinking and preach the gospel to the city.

In present pastoral ministry, we still need to have excellent preachers based in our cities. We should aim to have the brightest and best ready to engage with the ideas of our day, alert to how false teaching can appear. We should support our training institution, urging them to apply the highest standards for those training for leadership and ministry.

Taking note of the particular role that cities play in our broader culture and identity, means there is a place for deploying faithful preachers who will speak for the gospel of Jesus in, and for, the city.

I guess I am arguing for all preachers, lay and ordained, to see themselves as members of an Order of Preachers, who are called to the ministry of Jude – contenting for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. We should expect to continuously develop our preaching skills, and when called to serve in a city, play a role in addressing the counter-messages that would seek to cancel the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection for salvation.

By The Reverend **Jonathan Holt**