Badin Course 2015

**Anthropological Foundations of Religious Life I**

**Vivian Boland OP**

***Introduction***

One thing is beyond doubt: a Dominican community is made up of human beings. So we need to think about the anthropological foundations of Dominican religious life. What is it about our humanity that brings us to live together as we do? What is it about our humanity that enables us to live together as we do and that keeps us living together as we do?

Of course this level of our humanity can never be a full explanation of our particular way of life: we live together because we are Christians who believe we have been called to live out our baptism in this particular way, following Christ in the way of Saint Dominic. But we bring our humanity with us, obviously. And there is something in it for us, something we seek, not just because we are Christians but because we are human beings. We hope to be happy as Dominicans.

‘Grace does not replace nature but brings it to perfection’: we know this very well, that it is a fundamental theological principle. Dominicans are human beings who believe that the fulfilment of their human nature is to be found in this form of Christian and religious life. The grace of our vocation to be Dominicans is the grace that will, we believe, bring our human nature to its perfection. In this first session we want to think about that human nature, because we believe we can really only flourish as human beings, in other words we can really only be happy, if we live as Dominicans.

***The Desire for Happiness***

This is the **first anthropological foundation** which we can describe simply as **the desire for happiness**. We should not be misled by the term ‘happiness’. It does not mean being merry and jolly all the time. It refers to something deeper and more enduring. Aristotle calls it *eudaimonia* and St Thomas calls it *beatitudo*. It refers to human well-being, fulfilment, flourishing. There are different terms we can use, in English and in other languages. It is where St Thomas begins his consideration of morality, of specifically human action.

Of course when we come to the Order and we are asked ‘what do you seek?’ we do not say ‘happiness’. The answer we are advised to give is ‘the mercy of God and yours’ and I have never heard a Dominican giving any other answer! But we have already moved far along the road when we answer the question in this way. So let us step back a little bit and think of the genesis of a Dominican vocation. What is it that leads a person to this more formal, liturgical, moment when she or he will give that answer to the question, ‘the mercy of God and yours’? What has been happening before that moment?

Human beings seek to flourish. It is built in to our nature. It is part of the dynamism of our soul. It is what keeps people searching and seeking, trying different things, moving around, experimenting with different ways of living, making decisions, changing decisions, all of that. It seems uncontroversial to say that human beings want to be happy and that the major decisions they make about their lives are directed towards that goal. They will be directed towards intermediate goals as well – to live in a particular place, to marry a particular person, to take up a particular profession – but in and through those intermediate goals a person is always seeking a final or ultimate goal, which is not at the service of some further goal. And this final or ultimate goal we call ‘happiness’, fulfilment, flourishing, *beatitudo*.

There are two classical texts that look at the answers human beings tend to give to the question ‘what does the human being need if she is to flourish?’

* The *Consolation of Philosophy* tells of a dialogue between Lady Philosophy and Boethius, the author of the book, who is in prison awaiting execution. She takes him through possible answers to the question ‘where will I find happiness’. She considers the things which we sometimes think we need if we are to be happy and fulfilled: possessions, riches, pleasure, fame, power, respect, position in society, and so on. It is easy for Lady Philosophy to remind Boethius that true happiness is not found in having any or even all of these: Boethius has lost all of them and Philosophy’s consolation is that he is not therefore excluded from happiness. None of these is adequate for the nature we have or for the desire for good that we find in ourselves(*Consolation of Philosophy*, Books I-III). We must go on to consider virtue, truth, love and God, and this is where Lady Philosophy leads Boethius as we move through the *Consolation*.
* The second text is St Thomas’s *Summa theologiae* where he also considers the things which we sometimes think will guarantee our happiness: riches, honours, fame, power, certain physical attributes or achievements, pleasure, certain intellectual or social achievements, something somewhere in this created world (*Summa theologiae* I.II question 2). He also shows easily that none of these is adequate as the final or ultimate goal of human action. True human flourishing must be in ‘the highest exercise of the highest human faculty’ which for Thomas means ‘seeing God’. This is the highest exercise of our highest faculty, contemplating the First Truth which God is.

We might be tempted to think that where ‘other people’ look for fulfilment and happiness in power or riches or pleasure, we, because we are Christian and because we are religious, have made a different choice. On one level it is true, we have made a conscious decision and commitment to seek our happiness elsewhere. On another level we are never free of the temptation to seek our happiness precisely in these things: in riches, power, or the regard of other people, even in spiritualized versions of those things.

But our true fulfilment is found only in God, in the contemplation of God which is made possible for us by God’s grace. Thomas translates Aristotle’s Greek term *theoria* as *contemplatio*. Contemporary philosophers prefer to translate Aristotle’s term as knowledge or science but Thomas, influenced by Plato on the one hand and earlier Christian spirituality on the other, prefers the richer term contemplation. We are happiest when we are contemplating God.

***The Desire and Need to be Loved and to Love***

If we were to ask people directly ‘where is human fulfilment to be found?’ many of them, I think, would answer that it is to be found in loving and being loved. The present movement across the world to introduce marriage for same-sex couples seems to be based on this conviction. Human beings are made for love, they flourish when they are loved and are capable of loving back, and everybody should be entitled to live in the committed, exclusive, one to one relationship which is how marriage is now being defined. Of course it raises many fundamental questions for us – there is no reference to children, for example, or to the natural meaning of human sexuality. I am simply raising it here to show that people do have a sense of what we can call a **second anthropological foundation**, **the desire and need to be loved and to love**.

This too is obvious: in entering religious life we do not leave this aspect of our human nature outside the door. We bring it with us also. If we believe that religious life is a place in which we can flourish as human beings it can only be because we believe it is a place where we can express our love, for God and for other people, and where we will experience love in return, from God and from other people.

It is one interpretation we can give of what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God. ‘Male and female he created the human being’ (Genesis 1:27) refers, yes, to the complementarity of male and female in God’s plan and it reminds us of this fundamental reality: the human being needs to be in relation with others. It is in relating to others, in mutual knowledge and love, that we are truly the image of God.

I am not talking simply about sexual desire or sexual relationships although clearly that is another aspect of the human experience of loving and being loved that we need to think about. ‘You have made us for yourself, O Lord’, Augustine famously says at the beginning of his *Confessions*, ‘and our hearts are restless until they rest in you’. Our hearts are made for communion with other human persons and with God. It is a fundamental aspect of our nature as human beings and so it is fundamental to the humanity we bring with us when we enter religious life.

We can speak of this second anthropological foundation as the need for communion or community. It is very common now to hear people speaking about the individualism of contemporary culture compared with other and earlier forms of human society. For some it is one of the great gains of modern developed societies, that they give so much space to individual rights and freedoms. Others are more aware of the losses that have come about with this advanced individualism. They will point to a weaker sense of belonging to others in communities. They will point to a weaker sense of the duties that must always accompany human rights. They will point to a weaker sense of the fullness of human nature and identity because it is more true to say that individuals are made up of communities than to say that communities are made up of individuals.

Clearly this is a further fundamental aspect of the humanity we bring with us when we enter religious life. Some will see in religious life a counter-cultural phenomenon which is attractive to some people precisely because it challenges the individualism of our culture and recognises that human beings belong together. On the other hand we need to be aware of the challenges we can encounter when, as children of an individualistic culture, we try to live together in a form of life which originates in a very different cultural context. Dominic, Thomas, Catherine – they speak less about community than we do although their experience of it seems to have been more straightforward and obvious than ours is. Perhaps it is because it has become problematic that commentators on religious life spend so much time talking about community. One small example. In modern times we often hear about the ‘four pillars’ of Dominican life (or even religious life generally). These four pillars are identified as prayer, study, community, and preaching. Yet a text of Humbert of Romans, master of the Order from 1254 to 1263, speaks of the fundamental realities of our life as prayer, study, penance and preaching. We rarely speak of penance and talk a lot about community. The earliest Dominicans rarely spoke of community and talked a lot about penance.

***The Need to be Fruitful***

A **third anthropological foundation** of religious life is **the need to be fruitful**. When God created the human being in his image and after his likeness, the first thing God says to them is ‘be fruitful’. It is the first ‘mission’ mentioned in the Bible, Clearly it has a straightforward and literal meaning in the Book of Genesis: they are to reproduce, to have children, to spread across the world which they are to manage and dominate. Pope Francis has recently taken us back to thinking about this first mission in his encyclical letter *Laudato si’*. He is concerned with the kind of ‘dominion’ over creation which God gives to the human being. Our interest for now is in the first two words of the mission statement given to humanity, ‘be fruitful’.

I want to suggest that the ‘need to be fruitful’ is constitutive of human nature. Because the mission to ‘be fruitful’ is the mission given to human beings in the very moment of their creation, we can take it to be the most fundamental, foundational to the nature of the human being. It means being effective in the world, bringing something about, changing something, adding something, having an influence, contributing in some way to the improvement of somebody’s life somewhere.

The human nature we bring to religious life is characterized also by this need to be fruitful. To be fruitful as a Dominican will obviously have something to do with preaching and the fruits of preaching. We are to be the loving servants of the Word of God, sowing the seed of the Word here, there and everywhere. So the kind of fruitfulness for which we work is the fruitfulness of that Word. So it means knowledge and enlightenment, wisdom and understanding, conviction and conversion, justice and mercy. These are the fruits of the preaching of the Word and to be instrumental in bearing such fruits in people’s lives makes a Dominican happy. It is the fulfillment of our mission, the reason why we have been sent, to preach the gospel, to bear fruit that will last.

***First Conclusion***

So let us draw some first conclusions. I have been speaking about three anthropological foundations of religious life. This I take to mean three characteristics of human nature which we bring with us into religious life and which we hope to see being attended to as we live our religious life. These foundations are

* **the desire for happiness**
* **the desire and need to be loved and to love**
* **the need to be fruitful**.

To flourish as a human being means not only to live in the truth, and to live in love, but to bear fruit as a consequence of living in truth and in love. These are not exclusive to people called to religious life. They are universally human. Of course people will differ in how they pursue these desires and seek to satisfy these needs. The Dominican vocation gives a particular flavor, a particular emphasis, to how we pursue these desires and seek to satisfy these needs. We will think about them in relation to our service of the Word of God, contemplating it, studying it, living it together, celebrating it in the liturgy, teaching and preaching it.

The important point for the moment is that we not forget that this level of human desire and need comes with us into religious life. Of course we enter into a religious and theological context when we enter religious life but ‘grace does not replace nature’. Nature continues to assert itself and to assert itself most strongly along these three lines of desire and need.
Church documents about priestly and religious formation in recent decades have consistently stressed that the human level of formation is fundamental and that the other levels or aspects of formation – religious, intellectual, and pastoral – must be built on a sound and balanced human maturity.

**Questions for Groupwork**

1. ‘Now I know the major cause of your illness: you have forgotten your true nature’ (Lady Philosophy to Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* I 6). How is it possible for us to forget our true nature? How do we know what our true nature is?

2. ‘For the modern view society is made of individuals, for our view the individual is made of societies’ (Herbert McCabe OP). What does this statement mean? What are its implications for our formation and practice of Dominican community life?

3. ‘Consecrated chastity frees the human heart and thus becomes “a sign and stimulus of love as well as a special source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world”’ (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelica testificatio* (1971) n.14, citing *Lumen Gentium* n.42). How might consecrated chastity fulfil the human desire to be loved and to love, and the human need to be fruitful?