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**Anthropological Foundations of Religious Life II – Challenges and Difficulties**

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We have considered three fundamental anthropological themes that are foundational to religious life: the desire for happiness, the desire and need to be loved and to love, and the need to be fruitful. These are not special to people who want to be religious: the point is that people who want to be religious are also shaped and guided by these desires and needs. Our hope is that they will be expressed and fulfilled in appropriate ways through our living of the Dominican life. Now I want to offer some thoughts about **challenges and difficulties** that arise in regard to this hope today.

In thinking about the human level of formation, the brothers of the Order have come up with a list of challenges connected with formation at that level. Certain human qualities and virtues are essential if brothers are to be happy as Dominicans, if they are to participate responsibly in our form of self-government, and if they are to participate effectively in our community life and mission. What are the human qualities that facilitate the living of Dominican life? What particular virtues are needed if one is to live happily as a Dominican?

**CHALLENGES**

***Challenge 1 : what virtues are needed?***

All the moral virtues are needed if a person is to flourish overall, if he or she is to live the good life appropriate for a human being, for a Christian, and so for a Dominican. Are there some virtues that we can identify as particularly necessary for our form of life? Ones that come to mind initially are the following:

* ***Humility*** – a proper self-love based on a truthful acceptance of one’s gifts and limitations. It presupposes self-knowledge, something that is not always acquired quickly and something for which living together with others can be of great help. It ought to give us a sense of objectivity, a truthfulness, which is itself a moral virtue. We can link self-acceptance with this which is a proper self-esteem, the kind of love for oneself without which one cannot love others. It means valuing one’s own integrity appropriately and loving oneself as also a ‘neighbor’ who is to be loved.
* ***Prudence*** – one of the four cardinal virtues which is sometimes referred to in English as good sense, common sense or practical wisdom, it is the skill for making good decisions in the many different situations in which a person find herself, decisions that will move her closer to the fulfilment of her life overall rather than moving her away from that fulfilment.
* ***Responsibility*** – this means putting together a series of virtues associated with justice: *justice* itself which is the determination to render to each one what is due to them and to avoid favoritism, prejudice, and self-interest. *Piety* is the virtue that honors those from whom we have received what we can never repay in kind, all that has come to us from our parents, our teachers, our nation, the Order. *Honor* is another virtue involved here, a sense of respect for ourselves and for others which allows us to acknowledge properly people’s gifts and achievements and to give them proper honor for those gifts and achievements. *Obedience* is a moral virtue also that is part of justice and involves recognizing the right of those in authority to instruct us and to lead us. These are various ways in which we acknowledge our need for others and our obligation to help maintain and serve the common good.
* ***Gratitude*** – this is another virtue which is placed under justice although it can never be a matter of strict justice if it is to preserve its character as gratitude (‘grace’). Aristotle was unsettled by this virtue as it seemed to open the door to something that could not be rationally controlled. Thomas is not afraid of this, transforming Aristotle’s virtue of justice by setting it within the context of friendship and love.

***Challenge 2 : how help people to mature?***

It is easy to talk about maturity and immaturity. It is easy to identify it in ourselves and in others. It is quite another matter to see how people can be helped to mature. ‘Experience is the best school, but the fees are exceedingly high’ – so one of my teachers liked to say. He was, of course, right, but experience cannot be orchestrated or arranged. We want people to grow in responsibility and freedom so as to participate in the life and mission of the Order in the properly Dominican way. But if it is only through the living of life that people mature then we must allow people to live life in the hope that they will mature.

So our formation takes place through people actually living our life. There is no training for living Dominican life apart from living that life itself. It is our surest way of knowing whether people will be happy as Dominicans, to allow them to live as Dominicans. If people participate in the activities of our life and find joy in that participation it is a good sign for discerning whether or not they are made for our way of life. We hope to see a kind of comfort or ease in our brothers and sisters not only in relation to the province or congregation to which they belong but also in relation to the Dominican family as a whole.

In the years of formation decisions must be made about whether or not the context of our religious community is one in which this or that person is likely to mature. For some the answer will be yes, this person is immature but it seems that she or he is likely to mature with us. For others the answer will be no, this person is immature and it seems that staying with us is unlikely to give them the kind of challenge and support that will help them to mature. One of the tasks of the formator, and of others in authority, is to oversee a harmonious development of the person, to keep an eye that the person is living a balanced life and is maturing in a balanced way.

***Challenge 3 : intuition, listening, empathy***

People speak about ‘emotional intelligence’, which enables people to recognize and to read non-verbal communication, for example. It means being able to intuit what the other person is experiencing without needing them to speak about it. Some are naturally gifted for this kind of intuitive reading of people, and others are not. Sometimes people say women are better at it than men. Whether that is statistically true or not, who knows, but what is true is that there are men and women who are good at it, and there are men and women who are not good at it. (Thinking one is good at it and really being good at it are not necessarily the same thing.)

Empathy is not sympathy, as we know. It does not mean saying ‘I share your pain’. Nor does it mean saying ‘I know exactly how you feel’. How can one person know exactly how another person feels? We must wait for them to tell us. We must let them tell us in their own language, in their own way. This requires a certain kind of listening on our part, a listening not just with our ears but with our intelligence, with our imagination, with our heart. It means not jumping to conclusions but waiting for the person to find their way to speaking or not. Our communities are not therapeutic communities as such but they ought to be places in which people find some healing for the wounds of their lives. We do not need professional training in order to help each other in this way. We just have to live together as human beings and as Christians, showing each other kindness and mercy, relating to each other in truth and in love.

We know that the word *obedientia* includes the term *audire*, to listen. We are to be together, listening and speaking together, building communion on the basis of communication. One of the great challenges for us is to become good listeners, to stand back from the ways in which we feel fearful or anxious, and to allow the others to be and to speak. This is not just our obedience, it is also love, creating the space in which others can be themselves, received and appreciated as themselves.

**DIFFICULTIES**

What then about difficulties, are there some special difficulties that arise today, and that make it more difficult for people to flourish in religious life and to be happy, for example, as Dominicans? One might argue that human nature, sinful human nature, is always faced with difficulties no matter where it seeks happiness, looks for love, or tries to be fruitful. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are always likely to be understood and experienced as renunciation rather than freedom. Choosing a way of life that requires those vows is always going to be challenging and difficult. Money, sex and power (to put it bluntly) are unavoidable realities in human life – they are always present in some way in our quest for happiness, for love, and for fruitfulness. The challenge is to integrate those realities, and their significance for us, within our following of Christ on the way of Saint Dominic. Are there are some special difficulties today in relation to these fundamental realities. What I mean is when we think of people being formed now within the global culture and being shaped by it in how they think and feel, in what they expect and how they desire, will they be faced with special difficulties in relation to the fundamental realities of human life and of religious life? Let me illustrate the question through a number of examples.

***Difficulty 1 : what is ‘success’?***

How do the attitudes and ways of living that mean success in the contemporary world compare with the attitudes and ways of living that mean success in religious life? In other words when we unpack the sentence ‘you are living your life well’, and we try to identify what justifies that sentence, would we see any contrast between a justification coming from ‘the world’ and a justification coming from ‘Dominican religious life’?

***Difficulty 2 : the expectations of the ME generation***

American formators referred me to a book by Jean M. Twenge called *Generation ME: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (2006). It is a sociological study across a number of generations of American high school and college students which tries to identify changing attitudes and values from one generation to the next. It challenges some of the myths with which young people have been raised in the past two decades. One such myth is ‘you can be anything you want to be’. One of the reasons for this generation’s misery, she says, in spite of its privileges and the efforts of its parents to instill a sense of self-esteem, is that this sentence is not true but people are being raised to think that it is. The inevitable confrontation with reality brings them crashing down with more or less serious consequences.

The individualism of modern culture is strengthened by another post-modern myth which is ‘you don’t need their approval’. Once again it is the negative side of a desire to form people as independent and self-motivating. But it establishes in people the idea that they do not ever need other people’s approval, or even that they do not need other people at all.

‘Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all’ says a song from the 1980s. We know that we must love ourselves – St Thomas and St Catherine both speak of it, for example – but to speak of loving ourselves as the greatest love of all seems to take things beyond a Christian understanding of what it means.

These examples all form part of what Twenge calls ‘the self-esteem curriculum’ whose intentions might be good but whose effect has been to form a generation characterized by narcissism. We live in the age of the ‘selfie’. Photographs now must always include the most important person in my world, myself! People can move around alone and still come back with photographs showing them on their holidays. Twenge speaks about other outcomes of this focus on the self in post-modern culture: an obsession with appearance, an extension of adolescence beyond all previous limits, and materialism (the desire to have ‘lots of money’ is more prevalent in this generation than in previous generations).

This study raises big and interesting questions about the preparedness of the ME generation for religious life. Some of the formators have told me that they find this book’s analysis to be correct. The difficulties young people now encounter on entering religious life are concerned with freedom and entitlement, coping with limitation and failure, sharing life with others and so being able to enter into a genuine community life. The difficulties seem to be individualism, immaturity, impatience with community.

I will be interested to hear your thoughts about all this. Perhaps it is different for people coming from central and eastern Europe. But more and more we live in a globalized world, all participating in a worldwide culture that reaches from San Francisco to Saigon, from Montreal to Mombasa, from Warsaw to Buenos Aires.

***Difficulty 3 : word and image, fast-food and virtue***

A final set of difficulties is related to the last one. As Dominicans our way of life and our spirituality are focused on the Word. We are men and women of words at the service of the Word. Our task is to teach and to preach, and we do it mainly by speaking, using words either orally or in writing. Our concern is with truth, *veritas*, and this we have principally tried to serve through our use of words.

The dominant culture is not a culture of words but of images. People distrust long discourses and people’s attention span seems to be shrinking. The Twitter phenomenon, for example, means that world leaders now make comments on the most significant world events within the limits set by Twitter: usually a short, clichéd, banal observation which anybody could make. Where in the past we looked to political leaders for great speeches, we do not expect anything like that anymore. The last great speech-makers lived in the 1960s – John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, for example. Who has made a speech since then which all the world knows about and admires and likes to remember? Pope Francis may be an exception in that he is someone whose words too are being listened to. But his authority has been greatly helped by a number of key images from the very beginning of his papacy, the first moment he appeared on the balcony, his first trip to visit refugees in Lampedusa, embracing a handicapped boy and a deformed man, posing for selfies, etc.

Another aspect of the dominant cultures is its speed. The news rolls by 24 hours each day and great and disturbing events are presented to us hour after hour. Is it the case that people are becoming numb to much of what is presented to them because it is all just too much? Is it the case that the distinction between fantasy and reality begins to blur in the virtual world where anything can be manipulated and whole worlds can be created? We know that pornography is one of the biggest industries in the United States – it is about fantasy and stimulation, seducing people into unreal worlds, taking them away from real relationships with real people, from real responsibilities towards those people.

We are faced with some serious questions, then, we who aspire to be preachers of the truth of God’s Word in a culture of images and soundbites, of sensations and momentary experiences, of virtual reality which is often neither virtuous nor real.

We are faced with some serious questions, we who live a form of life whose virtues can only be practiced and strengthened over time. It is a form of life for which patience and perseverance are essential if there is to be fruitfulness and we live now in a culture which values speed, likes fast-food, wants emails to be answered at once, makes is possible for you to do now, immediately, so many of the things you want and need to do.

What are we to think of all this?