

THE FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION

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WE are sometimes asked and we sometimes ask ourselves, 'What is Dominican education?' It sounds a foolish and perhaps an arrogant question, as if Dominicans were supposed to possess a secret which made their teaching substantially different from everyone else's. That is not the idea at all. It is simply the question asked by an intelligent parent who is thinking of sending his child to a Dominican school. He knows what is meant by education; the process of equipping children with the means to know, love and serve God, and of developing their power to use these means. Education should produce *wise* men, naturally and supernaturally. There are many right but different ways of achieving this purpose, and to a great extent these different ways are represented by the different religious orders who teach. These teachers leave their several marks on their students. So the parent quite rightly asks, 'What sort of a wise man will my boy be after going to a Dominican school?' He is not suggesting that it is any better or any worse than a Benedictine or Jesuit wisdom; he would just like to know if and how it can be identified.

This question is very difficult to answer. We all know the pitfalls; we tumble into them ourselves. Jesuit-trained boys are efficient defenders of the faith, Benedictine boys are grounded in a kind of serenity arising from prayer and study. We say this sort of thing ourselves and immediately realize that it only scratches at the surface of the truth. We are like men trying to define a family likeness, and it can never be done adequately. We can only hope to understand the children when we know the parents and grandparents and the history of the family.

So we can only hope to catch some inkling of the kind of wise man a Dominican school should produce if we can understand something about Dominicans and get to know Saint Dominic. And the chief merit of such an enquiry is not that it advertises a particular brand of Catholic education, but that it helps us all, whatever brand we are purveying, to understand our own job a little better.

People often say Dominicans are easy to get on with. If this means anything more than a superficial friendliness we can expect

to find some warrant for it in the character of Saint Dominic. And just this sort of thing was said about him; he was charming, gay, equable, handsome and so forth, the hagiographers say, but none of those qualities is the essential stuff of holiness. We can none of us help our looks, and charm, if a virtue at all, needs something more beneath it. Behind all this in St Dominic's character there lay something much more important. He had discovered the secret of loving people individually, doing the supernatural in the most natural way possible. It is so easy in the name of detachment to take refuge in 'loving the brethren' or 'loving one's flock'. But love can only be given to individual people; you cannot really love a cause or an ideal; you may feel strongly about it if you love deeply the people who should benefit from it. Nevertheless real love can only be given to real people. St Dominic discovered this and with it God gave him a quite extraordinary capacity of fellow-feeling with others, especially sinners. He used to say he would not care if he were only a stone blocking the mouth of hell; this was because he really shrank from the thought of anyone going there. And there was the incident of the atheist innkeeper of Toulouse; it is easy enough to tell the story how St Dominic stayed up all night talking to him of God, but to realize the deeply felt love and compassion that drove him to this we should remind ourselves what it is like to travel, walking all day, and be faced with the prospect of a heavy day's work on the morrow; and then think of the ache in the limbs and pricking behind the eyes that besets us half way through an all-night vigil. A love that can compel a man to carry through with such a work of endurance must be very real indeed. Now that was the man who set the pattern for all Dominicans; a man given over to the love of individuals.

It is not surprising therefore if people say, as they do, that Dominican schools pay great attention to the individual child. This is sometimes misunderstood and the idea gets abroad that Dominicans deal with misfits. That is not so, though a limited number of 'mild' misfits can be helped if they are made part of the school family and treated as normal human beings. And Dominicans are equipped to do that by their tradition and training, which teaches them to take each person on his merits and first look for the positive qualities in him and develop those. Obviously this will remain something mysterious; for no living tradition can be satisfactorily encompassed in a rational statement. But we should

never forget that this is a living tradition only because St Dominic himself is at this moment living in heaven and is constantly improving on our efforts and our training by his own prayers and power. And that is a thing we can never afford to forget, for in the business of education we are constantly taking up tasks beyond our capacity; tasks, risks, chances, new enterprises. Every child is different, and every attempt to educate him is largely a shot in the dark. We have our experience, of course, we have all our technical knowledge, but the fact remains that this child is unique; however like he is to other boys we have known there is always something completely unknown. And so unless I had St Dominic praying in heaven I should never dare embark on such unknown seas.

And this is only a microcosm of the whole Catholic business of education. If Dominican education takes its character from St Dominic that is only because it is a small part of Catholic education which takes its character from Christ. It does this much in the same way that a child takes his character from his parents by heredity, that is, by sharing the same life. After all, that is, on a supernatural plane, the meaning of divine grace; it is the divine power and strength which Christ came on earth to share with us. For it is true that as a result of our baptism, we live, as far as it is possible for a creature, with the same sort of life as God. Education is the process of helping and encouraging children to live that life, and its work is done in two ways; through the teacher's technique of his craft, and ultimately through the power, the life, of Christ that is in him. This is one reason why the Church claims the right to direct education. The Church is the living Christ and therefore has the power to say how 'they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent'. This means that a teacher's power is found not only in what he does and what he knows, but in what he is. But it must be emphasized that this is not simply the force of example. A holy man has power not only because boys want to copy him, but because he has a share in the power of Christ, and it is here that we must remember the Communion of Saints.

We think of the saints in heaven as having power to help us and we know from our experience that this is so. It is not merely because they are interested on our goings on and happen to have plenty of time to intercede with God, nor is it even that there is a kind of reserve of power built up in heaven. These things may be

true enough, but there underlies them a more important thing which will always be something of a mystery and can best be described in terms of family sympathy. We are familiar with the phenomenon of telepathy between people who have some common bond; mother and son, perhaps. In an even stronger way the Communion of Saints works, and moreover works on earth between living Christians, because the grace we receive at baptism gives us the power to continue Christ's work of redeeming the world. Therefore we have some of Christ's power to lead one another to holiness and so we influence one another not only through deliberate and conscious example but more profoundly through unconscious communication, supernatural as well as natural. So we call the Church a family which shares a common source of life and it was for that reason that our Lord called himself not the way *to* truth and life, but the way *and* the truth *and* the life.

Of course there is a very large area of conscious influence; children realize it at least after they have left school; it is perhaps better that the teachers should not reflect too much on their own giving of example; being an example is a healthier way of looking at it. We have all known men who have not been particularly gifted as teachers, and yet their influence has been great because they have been holy; boys are certainly aware of this. With one half of themselves they may like the priest to say Mass in fifteen minutes, but there is another side to them, which appreciates Mass said devoutly. They notice these things; how easily we give ourselves an excuse for being absent from office in choir, how recollected a priest is in his outward manner and so forth.

The root of the thing, however, is below consciousness and depends on what we are, and this in turn depends on the life we share, which includes our religious life together; Mass, rosary and daily Compline for instance. Saying these things together strengthens the bond that exists through baptism and our religious vocation. The Church recognizes the importance of this bond in her law: pupils in a Dominican school, for instance, are automatically granted the legal status of *familiars*, and a Dominican who possesses only Order faculties has the power to hear their confessions. In other words, the Church is constantly emphasizing the fact that all teaching is a sharing, and a hand-in-hand advance towards eternal life. The remarkable thing is that this works

through what might otherwise be natural obstacles. We can remember Father Jerome Rigby, who spent practically all his Dominican life at the school at Hawkesyard and Laxton. In his latter years he became humanly speaking something of a hermit; that is to say, he did not spend a great deal of his time actually talking and so on with the boys. Nevertheless he always seemed to be in the middle of everything, and he was a person of whom the boys were vividly aware; they knew he cared and had a very deep interest in them and when they came back after leaving they always looked for him. Without *apparently* doing very much about it he shared his life with them, and that was because he was a real man of prayer.

That takes us to the specific Dominican thing, the care for and attention to individuals. It does not necessarily involve a great deal of private coaching or tuition or attention. It does mean that we shall, whether we try to help it or not, be considering the good of individual children and not merely the 'school'. We shall probably be involved for life with the families of the children we have taught. This is the result both of our training and of the power of Saint Dominic who is acting for us at present in heaven. It means, also, that we shall produce men who will have exactly this same 'slant' on wisdom. They too will be followers of St Dominic, not, that is to say, Dominicans, not even necessarily Tertiaries, but men who have something of the characteristics of St Dominic himself; the family likeness once again. They will share the qualities of St Dominic, St Thomas, Blessed Jordan, namely, patience, tolerance, gaiety and the ability to unbend. Everyone knows of St Dominic's patience with young people; Blessed Jordan's tolerance is typified in the famous story of his encouraging the giggling novices to have their laugh out before they proceeded with the office in choir. St Dominic's attention to trivial matters, even when he was head of the Order, was seen in such incidents as his carrying spoons all the way across Europe for the sisters in Rome. And the gaiety of all these saints is proverbial. St Thomas himself showed us the root of the matter. It is the contemplation of truth in all its diversity and unity. On the last day of his life he was found translating the Canticle of Canticles and then asking for a fresh herring. This was not an old man's whim, but the perfectly natural behaviour of a man who saw the whole of God's creation as one, a man who believed in the unity of truth and that

'omnia cooperantur in bonum'. Now all these things must be the mark of a Dominican wise man, and they will come not only from deliberate tuition but from sharing a tradition by living a life.

That life is a very deceptive one. At first sight Dominicans must seem the most active people in the world. In fact they are contemplatives, first and last, and their action not only springs from but is part of their contemplation which spreads beyond the cloister to the train and street and classroom. This can only be done if one believes in the unity of truth, that what we see in the train and street and classroom is part of God's truth and will lead us to God if we allow it. We are told that St Dominic only spoke either to God or of God. That is a very succinct way of saying that his whole life on the road or in the pulpit was knit together by a growing awareness that God was to be seen and greeted in his own creation. Now this must qualify Dominican education in all forms. It must mean that no form of knowledge is foreign to a Dominican way of life, and if perhaps we feel some apprehension about embarking on a new course which may be popularly dubbed 'dangerous'—the study of science, in its most intensive and concentrated forms, for instance—then is the time to think of St Dominic and to pray to him and ask him to show us how he would have dealt with the problem in such circumstances.

Above all we can never afford to forget that the real basic work of education is done in the life we live together, and that life must at its centre be a life of prayer. It is hardly possible to exaggerate the importance of night prayers, preferably Compline, said together by the whole household, community and school. There we have the source of a life that is at once Catholic and Dominican, naturally and supernaturally, and when that foundation is laid there is the beginning not just of a corporate life, but of true Catholic and Dominican men and women.

It must be doubly emphasized, however, that prayer is not a substitute for proficiency in one's job, though it may compensate for inculpable shortcomings, but is an essential condition of education on any terms. The most brilliant teacher will be ineffective without it and his skill will be only so much dead matter; prayer alone can bring it to life. Yet we may not underestimate technical ability; it is after all an integral part of the unity of truth, and a Dominican should take it in his stride.

Education itself however is a continuation of the work of the Incarnation; it is apostolic work. 'The Word was made flesh', says St John, and everything we teach is an utterance in time of the Eternal Word and a re-making of the flesh. Every day in the classroom the Word is brought to life in the child's mind and heart: 'His light was the light of the world and the light shines in the darkness'. We have all known lifeless teaching, imparting a language or a literature dead as mutton; teaching that knows all about paradigms and moods and tenses and voices but has never stirred a boy's pulse with the teacher's own enthusiasm for the music of Vergil or 'the surge and thunder of the Odyssey'. The words of such teaching never take flesh, they strike no spark in the child's heart because they cannot communicate and share their life; there seems to be no common bond.

This is clearly where grace builds on nature and the two cooperate. The teacher's efforts to communicate and share will be crowned with the grace of the Communion of Saints, and he will share far more in the classroom because from the beginning he has shared the sacramental life and the life of prayer. This is equally true after school in universities and seminaries. If the shared life of prayer is the Church's liturgical prayer then the seal is set on their work, for there they are united in the voice of Christ praying to his Father and bonds are forged which make their communication in school surpass anything human. St Dominic joins forces with us here and stamps his character on us, our children and our work. The very character he gives to our work is indeed entirely up to date. Someone has accounted for the gaiety of Dominican saints by the fact that they tried to do supernatural things in the most natural way possible (again, grace building on nature). The application of that idea to study is most important, especially in the sixth form. The conscientious boy, and still more the over-conscientious boy, tackles his work by girding himself up emotionally, setting his nerves tense and getting down to it. That is the wrong way. Doubtless it gets results, but it does violence to the person and the consequences in later life may be very serious. The fact is that the greatest concentration is achieved in relaxation. Watch any truly good sportsman, athlete or singer. When Peter May is in good form, although his concentration is immense and he is concerned only to defend his wicket, he is entirely relaxed. Watch René Soames singing: the muscles of his throat and jaw

are relaxed and therefore co-ordinated and responding quickly, and the singer is carried along by the rhythm and feel of the song. Mind and will direct his singing; the body and nerves, because they are relaxed, are ready to respond at once and put into operation what he finds in the music. The man is subordinated to the music. The same thing is true of study; the student's senses and intellect are completely surrendered to the work, not passively; he is reading actively because the will and intellect is in command. His critical faculty does not work like a sleuth looking stealthily round every corner for misdemeanours, but is first of all open to accept and acknowledge the truth in the text before him and only after that to think of flaws. This is surely a Dominican thing to seek truth in all reality. The same quality marked the man who met death with both the Song of Songs and a request for herrings on his lips.

Above all the psychology of relaxation, as they call it, is an acknowledgement of the dignity of the individual. The boy who enters the examination room at tension does so because he believes he must overreach himself and present the examiners with an artificial *persona* of acquired knowledge. The boy who enters relaxed does so because he has made his knowledge part of himself and it is that self he is going to show the examiners, believing it to be more valuable, significant and wise than all the learning in the library. Oddly enough this is what Advanced Level and Scholarship examiners are now asking for. And it is what St Dominic offers us in his gaiety, adaptability, and tolerance, and we shall pass it on the more easily as we ask him to share it with us. *Pie Pater Dominice*, the brethren prayed around his deathbed, because they feared the future if his magic presence was taken away. Seven hundred years later we still pray, and his presence is not completely removed; he does indeed stand advocate for us before the Great Judge, but we know that he also walks the earth not only in the Jarretts and McNabbs and Popes, but in us all by virtue of our inheritance and training. And the prayer we say nightly after Compline locks this up in our heads and hearts; bowed down as we are by the weight of our sins we are still daily lifted up by the *patronage* of St Dominic. And as every schoolmaster knows, true *patronage* will only come from a true father, a *pater*, who shares his life with us and our children if together we ask him to grant it by his prayers.