

The Dominican Charism and Higher Education: A Personal Reflection from the Field

Aurelie A. Hagstrom, S.T.D.

Abstract

Providence College is part of a nation-wide consortium of nineteen Dominican colleges and universities. Every two years, one of these schools hosts the *Dominican Colleges Colloquium*, a conference focusing on how the Dominican charism can be effectively embodied, lived, and promoted in higher education. I have attended two of these colloquia over the past several years and have been enriched and challenged at each. Typically, more than 200 people gather to attend workshops, lectures, and seminars concerning our shared Dominican mission in Catholic higher education. Topics of discussion usually include best practices for enhancing mission, curriculum ideas, student life activities, and resources for ritual celebrations of the founding Dominican communities and saints. This article shares some of the wisdom I have acquired during these valuable gatherings.

The *Dominican Colleges Colloquium* experience is an important resource for mission implementation at Catholic colleges and universities. There is a paucity of published resources and texts specifically on the Dominican tradition in higher education, and this gathering provides a rich source of wisdom. While there are a plethora of books, articles, and monographs on Dominican theology, history, and spirituality in general, scholarly—or even popular—texts that explain how the Dominican charism is to be realized on a college campus are scarce. Therefore, the keynote addresses, workshop presentations, and informal conversations at these colloquia are important resources for faculty, administrators, and staff who are working on mission integration within their institutions. Indeed, the principle that oral tradition precedes any written deposit of the faith seems to hold true for the efforts of mission integration at Dominican institutions.

Aurelie Hagstrom is Associate Professor of Theology, Providence College, Providence, RI.

Mission of the Church, Mission of the College

As a professor of Theology at Providence College, I have been passionately interested in the questions and issues raised at the *Dominican Colloquium*. I believe that the mission of any Catholic college flows from the mission of the Church itself. Christ commissions the Church to be His presence in the world until He returns and to seek the kingdom of God amidst temporal affairs. Put simply, the mission of a Catholic college is to educate with the presuppositions and principles that the Gospel of Jesus Christ provides. All of the enterprises of Providence College, therefore, should find their foundation in the rich Catholic Intellectual Tradition and have as their context the incarnational and sacramental worldview that the Church gives us.

While the mission of Catholic higher education extends back to the medieval universities of Europe, we are called, and perhaps even have a sacred responsibility, to ensure that this mission is still vibrant and flourishing today. The good news is that Dominican colleges and universities have a charism and a centuries-long tradition which inspire and motivate our mission.¹ Rooted in the vision of St. Dominic and the genius of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Dominican charism has been embodied for centuries by the men and women of the Dominican order—clergy, religious, and third-order laity.² This wellspring of spirituality, mysticism, and scholarship—grounded in the four pillars described below—is the source of our inspiration as we engage a postmodern world.³

Four Pillars of the Dominican Charism

Over the years, many of the presenters and participants at the *Dominican Colloquium* have articulated the Dominican charism in higher education using the image of four pillars. These four pillars of Dominican life are study, prayer, community, and service. St. Dominic called this four-fold pattern of life “holy preaching.”⁴ The four pillars are explicitly

¹ See Gabrielle Kelly and Kevin Saunders, *Dominican Approaches in Education: Towards the Intelligent Use of Liberty* (Hindmarsh, S.A.: ATF Press, 2007).

² See Benedict Ashley, *The Dominicans* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier Books, 1991).

³ See Paul Murray, *The New Wine of Dominican Spirituality: A Drink Called Happiness* (London: Burns & Oates, 2006).

⁴ Simon Tugwell, *The Way of the Preacher* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 5-21; See also Humbert of Romans, “Treatise on the Formation of Preachers,” in Simon Tugwell, ed., *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 179-384.

stated in the mission statements of most Dominican colleges and universities. The first pillar, *study*, refers to the pursuit of truth, which is central to the Dominican intellectual tradition.⁵ This includes all of the intellectual disciplines, not just theology. The second pillar, *prayer*, is to be appreciated in light of St. Dominic's "nine ways" of prayer. He loved to pray with his whole body, kneeling, prostrating himself, and holding up his hands in various gestures.⁶ This spirituality highlights prayer and contemplation as the basis for action in the world. *Community* is a pillar because right relationships, reconciliation, common interests, and shared work are the basis for mission. And the final pillar, *service*, is how the challenge of loving God and neighbor is embraced as a way of life. These four pillars are a way of unpacking the Dominican motto: "to contemplate truth and share with others the fruit of this contemplation."⁷

Common Questions

While I have found this articulation of the four pillars of the Dominican mission helpful, I must admit that living them at Providence College (or indeed at any college) is a difficult task. Participation in the *Dominican Colleges Colloquium* has given me the chance to reflect on the practical ways in which the Dominican charism is the inspiration for our work and also to ponder the challenges that face us as we strive to maintain this sacred enterprise. Regardless of institution, all of us share many deeper questions and issues concerning the implementation of the "lived mission." These common questions would include:

- Is our Catholic, Dominican mission invisible, intuitive, and implicit or is it visible, deliberate, and explicit?
- How does the Dominican intellectual tradition inform our campus ethos, curriculum, recruitment, promotional material, faculty orientation, etc.?
- How can we be rooted in the Catholic, Dominican tradition and yet be open to adaptation, innovation, and change?
- How do we maintain a strong Catholic and Dominican identity without becoming sectarian or fundamentalist in our approach?

⁵ Thomas McGonigle and Phyllis Zagano, *The Dominican Tradition: Spirituality in History* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006), 1-13.

⁶ Simon Tugwell, ed., *The Nine Ways of Prayer of Saint Dominic* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1978).

⁷ Erik Borgman, *Dominican Spirituality: An Exploration* (London: Continuum, 2001), 24-39; John-Baptist Reeves, *The Dominicans* (Dubuque: Priory Press, 1959), 92.

In the following discussion, each of these questions is individually addressed, in light of my experience at Providence College.

Is our Catholic, Dominican mission invisible, intuitive, and implicit or is it visible, deliberate, and explicit?

Providence College makes a conscious effort to embody a vibrant Dominican mission through an involved administration, through a visible public presence on our website, and through active Dominican life on campus.

Administration

The legacy of the Dominican charism is a dynamic tradition, lived and visible on our campus. To ensure this legacy, we have several administrative structures in place. For example, our bylaws state that the College president must be a Dominican Friar. In this way, we have a Dominican presence from the top down in our administration. We also have a vice president for mission and ministry who sits on the Presidential Cabinet and remains intimately involved in the daily life of the campus. Five years ago, we established a Center for Catholic and Dominican Studies that offers intellectual and spiritual formation for staff, faculty, and students by way of workshops, lectures, art exhibits, and roundtable discussions.

Website

To promote visibility, the mission statement is prominently displayed on the college website. It includes links to information about what it means to be a Catholic, Dominican institution of higher learning. These links feature both the inaugural address from our current President, Fr. Brian Shanley, O.P., in which he offers his vision of a Dominican education, as well as short essays entitled “What does it mean to be a Dominican?” and “What does it mean to be a Catholic and Dominican college?”⁸ This visible and explicit demonstration of mission on our website promotes our Dominican identity and commitment.

⁸ See Providence College website, “What does it mean to be a Catholic and Dominican college?” <http://www.providence.edu/About+PC/Dominican+Identity.htm> and “What does it mean to be Dominican?” <http://www.providence.edu/Mission+Ministry/Dominican/>.

Dominican Presence

Providence College is blessed with a large Dominican community of approximately forty men living in our on-campus priory. They serve as faculty and as administrators and offer, in my opinion, the most important dimension of their Dominican presence: their witness of prayer and vowed living in community. This is a campus soaked in prayer. Examples include the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours each day in the priory chapel, daily Masses offered in St. Dominic Chapel, and the personal contemplation of the Friars. This prayerful presence is the spiritual foundation of our campus community. In addition, like most Catholic colleges, our chaplain's office offers students a wide range of ministries, retreats, opportunities for Christian service, and also times for spiritual direction, which spring from this foundation of prayer.

How does the Dominican intellectual tradition inform our curriculum, faculty orientation, campus ethos, recruitment, promotional material, student programs, etc.?

At Providence College, we address the Dominican intellectual tradition by purposefully integrating the tradition throughout campus life and work. Several examples are cited below.

Curriculum

The Dominican charism is expressed in the curriculum. The theology and philosophy courses that are part of the core academic requirements help students to articulate the Catholic, sacramental worldview. By taking a minimum of six credits in each discipline, students are exposed to the unique relationship between faith and reason embedded in the Dominican intellectual tradition.

Faculty Involvement

For nearly ninety years, Providence College has offered thousands of students a Catholic higher education in the Dominican tradition. Hundreds of Dominican Friars have taught in the College's classrooms, laboratories, and lecture halls. The Dominican intellectual heritage is introduced to new faculty during their orientation. In collaboration with the Center for Catholic and Dominican Studies, the vice president for mission and ministry gives a presentation, followed by small group

discussions facilitated by both faculty and administrators. In this way, new members of the faculty are invited to participate in the ongoing conversation about mission at Providence.

The participation of lay faculty in the Dominican mission is a central component of cultivating the Dominican intellectual tradition. Without an intellectual community of faculty who are willing to embrace and integrate the Dominican mission in their teaching, the mission statement and a presence of Catholic faculty are meaningless. Yet, there remains a challenge: how can the faculty, the community of scholars at the heart of the college, also be at the center of the religious vision of our educational endeavor? And, how can faculty who do not share the religious affiliation of the college be engaged by the Catholic, Dominican mission? These are critical questions, for faculty enhance and communicate the mission differently than do administrators or trustees. For this reason, Providence College has included a “mission response” statement in the application process for all faculty positions. During the on-campus interview, this written statement serves as the basis of a conversation with our president specifically about mission. Our new faculty orientation workshop each August is a recent attempt to encourage faculty to participate in the Catholic, Dominican mission of the College. Genuine faculty ownership of the mission is, indeed, an ongoing challenge as we move forward and grow as an institution.

Dominican Aesthetic

Our physical environment is another way that the Dominican tradition is expressed at Providence College. Through architecture and symbols, we convey our Catholic, Dominican identity. For instance, inscriptions, sculptures, stained glass windows, artworks, crucifixes in classrooms, chapels, and a grotto of Our Lady exemplify our commitment to our Dominican heritage. This campus ethos is a tangible reminder of our mission and embodies the Dominican sacramental principle that the material can communicate the divine. This campus aesthetic also appears on our logos and promotional materials that are used in recruitment, advertising, and fundraising.

Athletics

The athletic programs at Providence College also express our Dominican intellectual tradition. Providence College is best known to most of the world not as a Dominican institution, but rather as a Division

I basketball school with a storied athletic tradition. Indeed, we are even popularly known as a “basketball factory” on the east coast. But, even here, our Dominican charism is at work. St. Thomas Aquinas argued that play and sport are necessary for the good of the soul.⁹ So, it could be argued that athletics should be included as one of the major ways that the Dominican charism is manifested.

How can we be rooted in the Catholic, Dominican tradition, and yet be open to adaptation, innovation, and change?

Providence College faces the challenge of remaining rooted in the Dominican charism, carefully articulated and widely understood by the founding community, while also being open to an evolving interpretation of this tradition as it confronts new conditions and new questions. In other words, is it possible to see legitimate innovation and thoughtful adaptation as a natural evolution of the College’s mission without feeling threatened that we are diluting or forsaking our heritage? Although there are challenges, I believe the answer is yes.

New Conditions

Several new conditions pose new challenges to preserving the Catholic, Dominican legacy. The changing student population, the hiring of non-Catholic faculty, and dwindling numbers of Dominicans in the classroom prompt us to think more creatively about how we can preserve our heritage. For instance, although all of our students used to come to Providence College precisely because they (and their parents) were seeking a Catholic education, currently, the reasons for student applications are diverse and do not necessarily include any consideration of the institution’s Catholic, Dominican mission.

Another reality that has affected our mission is the growing number of non-Catholic faculty being hired. We can no longer simply presuppose that all of our faculty are actively involved in or even interested in our Catholic, Dominican identity. Finally, the aging population of the Dominican Friars on campus means that each year a few more Dominicans retire from active teaching and ministry.

⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, T. McDermott, trans., *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1987, Original work published in 1274), 2ae2ae, 168, I.

These changing conditions call for a renewed creative effort for innovation and adaptation of the mission. Our attempts to deal with this gradual loss of the Catholic subculture ethos have only just begun; and, some initiatives are already in place. For example, our president hosts two open conversations with faculty each year entitled: “Teaching at a Catholic College” and “Being a non-Catholic faculty member at Providence College.” These open forums have been moderately successful in exposing the tensions and fears of non-Catholic faculty concerning mission integration across the curriculum. We have also tried to celebrate the various religious traditions of our non-Catholic students with specific academic programming to foster interreligious dialogue. Rather than weakening our Catholic, Dominican identity, these efforts to engage the growing number of non-Catholic faculty and students can actually strengthen our mission.

How do we maintain a strong Catholic and Dominican identity without becoming sectarian or fundamentalist in our approach?

Intellectual Hospitality

I now address the final question based on my own discipline of theology and my observations about Providence College’s efforts to avoid a kind of fundamentalism that would be contrary to our Dominican tradition. My personal responsibility as a theologian is to teach the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. My context for this endeavor is the approach to theology in the Dominican tradition. This Dominican approach is dialogical and includes a certain kind of “intellectual hospitality” modeled by St. Dominic himself.

While traveling through Toulouse, St. Dominic encountered an innkeeper who was a member of the Albigensian heretical sect. St. Dominic stayed up all night sitting with him and talking about the truths of the Catholic faith. By dawn, we are told, St. Dominic had won the innkeeper back to the true faith. This famous incident illustrates that the Dominican approach to theology is dialogical: it seeks to proclaim, persuade, and convince its opponents and respondents rather than silence, defeat, and conquer them. Sectarianism can be avoided if this kind of “intellectual hospitality” is practiced on our campus in the context of meaningful dialogue, as used by St. Dominic.¹⁰

¹⁰ Simon Tugwell, ed., *Jordan of Saxony: On the Beginnings of the Order of Preachers* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1982), 4-5; See also Bede Jarrett, *Life of St. Dominic* (Westminster: Newman Bookshop, 1947), 17-18.

In addition, St. Thomas Aquinas also employed a dialogical model in his theology. In his *Summa*, he used the teachings of a Jew, Maimonides, as well as a Muslim, Averroes.¹¹ In fact, the philosophy of the pagan Aristotle, which was an integral element in Aquinas' project, was largely available to him only through these Jewish and Islamic scholars. In this dialogue, St. Thomas was not afraid to find truth even from people with whom he did not agree philosophically or theologically. This sort of confidence in seeking the truth wherever it may be found is based upon the convictions that truth is one and that there can be no contradiction between the truth that flows from faith and that which comes through reason. This bold search for truth in a dialogical methodology, which avoids fundamentalism, is a challenge for anyone who desires to engage in theological inquiry in the Dominican tradition.

Conclusion

My hope is that those of us who are involved in the faculty, staff, and administration of our Catholic, Dominican colleges and universities will grapple with these four basic questions. This shared project is a dynamic tradition, founded on the vision of St. Dominic and the genius of St. Thomas Aquinas.

This Dominican charism is a kind of "prism" which should color all of our endeavors. In this way, all that we are and everything that we do must be channeled through this "prism" which includes not only the intellectual tradition of the Dominicans, but also their legacy of history, spirituality, and mysticism. The ongoing conversation on the campus of any Dominican college or university must be focused on evaluating programs, services, agencies, and efforts through this "prism" of the Dominican charism. This is, without doubt, a daunting task, but it is one we can accomplish if we remember that mission integration is an ongoing conversation that must involve and welcome everyone on campus. Through this ongoing conversation and dialogue in the Dominican tradition, ideas will surface, creativity will be enhanced, and genuine understanding will be achieved. The fruits of this dialogue of mission integration, moreover, will go beyond programs, plans, and strategies. Indeed, it will promote critical self-conscious reflection that will lead to transformation and to shared vision and will allow "Dominican dynamism" to meet the challenges of Catholic higher education in the twenty-first century.

¹¹ St. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*.

Selected General Bibliography of Dominican History, Thought, and Spirituality

Ashley, Benedict. 1991. *The Dominicans*, edited by Michael Glazier (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press).

Baron, Robert. 2008. *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master* (New York: Crossroad Publishing).

Davies, Brian. 2004. *Aquinas* (New York: Continuum).

Healy, Nicholas. 2003. *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life* (London: Ashgate Publishing).

Kelly, Gabriel, and Kevin Saunders. 2007. *Dominican Approaches in Education: Towards the Intelligent Use of Liberty* (Hindmarsh, S.A.: ATF Press).

Murray, Paul. 2006. *The New Wine of Dominican Spirituality: A Drink Called Happiness* (New York: Burns & Oates).

Nofke, Suzanne, and Guiliana Cavallini. 1980. *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press).

O'Meara, Thomas. 1997. *Aquinas Theologian* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press).

Blessed Raymond of Capua. 2009. *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books and Publishers).

Selman, Francis. 2007. *Aquinas 101: A Basic Introduction to the Thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Allen, TX: Christian Classics).

Tugwell, Simon. 1982. *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press).

Tugwell, Simon. 1988. *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press).

Zagano, Phyllis, and Thomas McGonigle. 2006. *The Dominican Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press).