**Looking towards the apostolic future: Andy Doyle, Lay Dominicans North East**

The Rule of the Lay Dominicans outlines the apostolic mission of the Order: to bear witness to our own faith, to be attentive to the needs of those around us, to serve the truth and to show mercy to all, to defend freedom and to promote justice and peace, all the while being mindful that apostolic action flows from an abundance of contemplation.

The Rule also states clearly that we Lay Dominicans participate in the Order’s apostolic mission through study, prayer and preaching, 3 of the 4 Pillars of Dominican Life. When speaking of Lay Dominicans, it is sometimes thought, even within the Order of Preachers, to be prudent to replace the word preaching with apostolate (perhaps because of a risk of seeing it only or predominantly in terms of liturgical preaching or possibly because some of its negative modern undertones – nobody wants to be ‘preachy’) but this, to my mind, has the potential of obscuring something important.

All Christians are called to an apostolate. The Decree on the Role of the Laity states clearly: “*The Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate.*”

What is this apostolate? The Decree on the Role of the Laity tells us “*The Church was founded for the purpose of spreading the kingdom of Christ throughout the earth for the glory of God the Father, to enable all people to share in His saving redemption, and that through them the whole world might enter into a relationship with Christ. All activity of the Mystical Body directed to the attainment of this goal is called the apostolate*.” Indeed the Decree goes on to say without compromise that members of this Mystical Body “*who fail to make their proper contribution to the development of the Church must be said to be useful neither to the Church nor to themselves*.”

We can sometimes soften these uncompromising words and comment that the apostolate is served by the way we live our lives but the Decree on the Laity outlines something more. It says explicitly that, although the way we live our lives is, of course, of great value, the apostolate “*does not consist only in the witness of one's way of life; a true apostle looks for opportunities to announce Christ by words addressed either to non-believers with a view to leading them to faith, or to the faithful with a view to instructing, strengthening, and encouraging them to a more fervent life. "For the charity of Christ impels us" (2 Cor. 5:14). The words of St Paul should echo in all hearts, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16).*”

Those words of St Paul should find a special resonance within the life of Dominicans as we recall our founding purpose: preaching and the salvation of souls. Our apostolate is to preach, in words and actions, in art and learning, in teaching, catechising, evangelising as well as in caring for others and in our service to truth. Looking to the future, let us be more confident in our preaching for it is precisely in our preaching that we find our ‘proper contribution to the development of the Church.’

We were asked to speak on the subject “Looking towards the apostolic future”. I have addressed the second part first and hope to see an apostolic future that embraces and celebrates fully our vocation to preach as being our distinctive apostolate. To do so requires that we now examine the first part of the brief - looking.

In Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language one of the descriptions used to define the word ‘look’ is “to direct the intellectual eye”, according well with our commitment as Lay Dominicans to study. In directing our intellectual eye we observe, we discern and we decide. In order to do this well, we need to apply a range of modes of vision or of sight.

Firstly, we need to be aware of the most sure of the modes of sight – **hindsight**. We need to look to the data of the past and to those who have walked the Dominican way before us. Dominic, Catherine, Thomas and many others don’t simply instruct, or enthuse or challenge us - although they clearly do so - but they give us a family history, an identity that forms us and gives us resources for our preaching on earth as well as companions in the glories of heaven where we shall see God face to face. From across the centuries, theology and art, poetry and philosophy, music and learning all combine to give us a unique and valuable perspective that positions us well as we go forward into the future.

Secondly, we need to be **far-sighted**. In the words of the Responsory sung at Durham Cathedral and many other places at the very beginning of Advent, we need to look from afar and perceive the coming of God and the covering of the earth with the cloud of his Presence. We need to join with Pope Francis who has invited us to dream and hold on to the vision of a renewed future. We need to claim for our days and for the future the words of the Lord recorded in Joel: “*In those days, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old will dream dreams, your young will see visions*.” (Joel 2:28) We need to be faithful to our baptism and to live as priest, prophet and king.

Reducing our horizons a little, we need to be **long-sighted**, adopting a purposeful perspective that takes our dreams and visions and enables us to sit down and to plan. We recently heard at Sunday Mass from Luke’s Gospel: “*Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, ‘This person began to build and wasn’t able to finish*.” (Luke 14:28-30). The notion of ‘sitting down and planning’ can sometimes smack of a managerial business culture, tying us up in mission statements and milestones, that can often degrade into vacuous statements and millstones. We are to be long-sighted and to plan but always with an outlook that is bright with prophecy, dreams and vision.

But we also need to be **near-sighted**, looking close by and in detail at what the current needs of those around us truly are and, more particularly, what are those needs that we are being called to address. Sometimes the panoramic view and particularly the range and intensity of human need across the globe overwhelms us and reduces us to the position of helplessness – a certain near-sightedness enables us to focus, to reach out and to be agents of truth, justice and peace. Our agency at the UN, Dominicans for Justice and Peace, do tremendous work and in the North East we looked at their efforts just a couple of months ago in one of our meetings. But are these efforts well-supported and, allied with this, what are we doing in our own cities, towns and villages and with whom are we collaborating in the cause of justice?

We need to cultivate a sense of **oversight** – of accountability and of purpose. What is it that we are embarking upon as we move into the future and how do we discern what is necessary for the journey? How do we ensure that we, as Lay Dominicans, can journey together, sharing our skills and talents and moving beyond the borders of our own fraternities and fraternal groups? How can we ensure that our formation is shared, meaningful and truly directed towards the Kingdom?

We need to be blessed with **insight.** This does require a degree of introspection and a looking inwards but that in itself is not sufficient. Our calling as Lay Dominicans is not to create groups that are turned in on themselves but rather to offer our specific gifts in the service of the entire Church and to promote a just and compassionate world. True insight requires a certain humility that is ready to expose ourselves to the searching gaze of God and to be transformed by it so that we may discern “all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise.” (Philippians 4:8). And having discerned all these things, we are to celebrate them and to stand in solidarity with those who promote them.

In looking towards an apostolic future we need to exercise all these modes of sight but never losing “*sight of Jesus who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection*.” (Hebrews 12)

Allied with these forms of looking there is another that is crucial to us if we are to fulfil our vocation of preaching. It is the view from those amongst whom, to whom and for whom we preach. I hesitate to compare we Dominicans to lice but the famous final verse of the ‘wistful agnostic’ Robert Burns’s “Ode to a Louse” remains instructive to us:

*O wad some Power the giftie gie us O would some Power with vision teach us*

*To see oursels as ithers see us! To see ourselves as others see us!*

*It wad frae monie a blunder free us, It would from many a blunder free us,*

*An' foolish notion: And foolish notions:*

*What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us, What airs in dress and carriage would leave us,*

*An' ev'n devotion! And even devotion!*

*Andy then invited two people relatively new to the Dominican life in the North East to offer their own views as to how to live an apostolic future.*