

# The Significant Life of a Dominican House of Studies<sup>1</sup>

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It has not been easy to decide on a suitable title for this address. The phrase 'significant life' has been chosen in preference to 'role', 'function', or even—wilder flights, these—'inner life' or 'soul'. The point has been to indicate a perspective (rather than to frame a policy) for our common life of study at Blackfriars, and to propose it for inspection and reflection (not for instant discussion). I am conscious that many of my hearers this evening have had to listen to me before, sometimes for many years, and it is hardly likely that they will hear anything new from me today; and yet there would seem to be some value in publicly rehearsing, with some ceremoniousness, views which are intended to elicit positive attitudes of assent or dissent, to contribute to a common if differentiated consciousness. With this in mind, I have upon careful consideration determined to speak with as much honesty as I am capable of; the time has really passed, if it ever existed, for triumphalism of any form, conservative or progressive. What is offered is a 'Here I stand', like Luther's; but it is not necessarily, not yet, anyway, an 'I can do no other', provided someone shows me how. Those of my hearers who are not Dominicans have at least done us the honour of sharing our erratic pilgrimage, and I must suppose that they too will not be without concern for an attempt to sketch out its horizons, if hardly to plot its future course.

I shall begin with a statement, or rather a resolute affirmation, of the utterly obvious: the significant life of a house of studies is to be assessed by its concern for study. No one who is familiar with the recent history of this house is likely to doubt the need for the assertion of anything so obvious. It is not indeed my purpose to offer this statement in a limiting or exclusive sense as though study and nothing else, and study irrespective of any further discriminatory analysis of what might be involved in such study, were alone to serve as a criterion of the significant life of this or any other house of studies. The point of resolutely affirming the obvious is to insist on an order of priorities, such that whatever else this house may achieve either as a community or through individuals in it, the significant life of the house would not be intensified or enlarged unless these achievements issued from or contributed to a shared life of study.

Even with the preliminary qualifications issued a moment ago—

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qualifications which will shortly be examined in more detail—the absoluteness of this affirmation is likely to arouse disquiet. I hope I may be allowed to say that one contributory cause of any such disquiet would be the general ambiguities and uncertainties which have been allowed to cloud the essential Dominican vocation. I regard this vocation as a service of the Word, involving a reverence for the life of intelligence in the economy of our redemption in Christ, an intelligence which is compassionate without sentimentality, creative without eccentricity, sensitive without preciousness, contemporary without servility to fashion, and wholly absorbed by and transparent to the Gospel in the mystery of the Church. By study, then, I understand the disciplined cultivation of such an intelligence, and it is for the life of study understood in this sense that I am making the assertion of unconditional priority.

To make an assertion of priority is at least implicitly to reject alternative systems of priorities; and it may help to make more concrete what is involved in the system of priorities now being recommended if some of the alternatives are briefly inspected. It appears to me that the most important of these can be formulated in the injunction, 'In the destructive element immerse'. In one or another of a variety of senses this imperative has been a dominant theme of Western civilization since at least the Romantic movement (Blake is a key figure here): the replacement of the Other world by the Under world, whether this underworld is conceived of as individual or social unconscious, what the individual or society refuses to admit to the light of common day, and now felt to be more real than the world of public acknowledgment. By a strange reversal, the dwellers in the sun are consumed by a nostalgia for the cave. It is surely unnecessary to document this preoccupation with illustrative texts: the theme is obvious enough. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that the most interesting variants of the theme are genetic or evolutionary: concerned, that is to say, with the passage from darkness to light, such that the passage is conceived of as redemption or salvation. The destructive element is also the source of fertility, the pregnant chaos of energies awaiting transcendence and liberation. It is hardly surprising that two variants of the theme, the Marxist and the Jungian, have exerted a special fascination on English Dominicans in the last thirty years, the Jungian variant more persistently and on the whole more professionally. But even where the preoccupation with the publicly unacknowledged has not acquired ideological consistency it continues to be active in a distrust of the common order and a concern for what it seems inevitably to exclude, a distrust and a concern which would count itself spurious if it did not share compassionately in the sickness of the afflicted or the constraint of the captive. 'In the destructive element immerse.' That form of common public order which has been codified as a regular Dominican way of life seems for this concern (which I share)

expressly designed to inhibit access to the real sources of life, to smother the processes of transcendence.

Now no assertion of the absolute priority of the life of study, even in a house of studies, would deserve the least attention if it were deaf to this appeal *de profundis*. The redemptive process as integration of the personality or as historical liberation sufficiently resembles the redemption in the passion, death and resurrection of Christ to allow us, at least provisionally, to articulate our concern as Christians in the language and in the style of release of energies from sociological or psychological constraint; in fact any concern claiming to be Christian which simply rejected these contemporary styles would no longer be Christian. Nor again is it particularly to my purpose here to argue that the Christian doctrine of sin and grace could not accept without serious qualification accounts of redemption in terms of the release of energies which are only by their dissociation or alienation morbid. My point is that the significant life of this house of studies must consist *primarily* in the articulate interpretation of the concern in the service of the Word. The *primary* concern of a house of studies must be a *contemplative* engagement in the world.

'Contemplative engagement' or 'engaged contemplation' may still be a faintly unfamiliar combination of terms; engagement may still be felt to exclude that sort of withdrawal from the world felt to be proper to the contemplative life. Once again, it should be sufficient here to say that the engaged contemplation envisaged and recommended is not a *theoria* opposed to *praxis*, but a (Pauline) *gnosis* into the *mysterion* of Christ as this is disclosed in the history of mankind; not a withdrawal into the cell of self-knowledge but an entrance into the Christian meaning of time by way of the Christian meaning of our times. The common and shared activity for which priority is being claimed continues to be contemplative in that it is primarily a concern with meanings: the significant life of the house should be a life which contributes to the evangelical clarification of our historical epoch. We have, in contemplative engagement, to search for a focus of meaning, that Meaning of meaning to which we already have access in faith, God in Christ.

What this involves for our intellectual life is that we should continually raise the question of ultimate meaning, while confidently living in the presence of the ultimate answer: in the beginning was the Yea. The Gospel is promise and judgment at once; as judgment 'the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discriminating the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (Heb. 4, v. 12). No merely human word or perspective can be exempt from the *krisis* of the Word of God, its continuous critique of pure reason. But it is only in the promise of the Word of life that we can endure the relativity of every human perspective and continue resolutely to put the ultimate question, 'What does it all mean?' This is not only

an abstractly intellectual matter but something to do with the seriousness with which we take ourselves and the way we lead our lives.

There are two familiar styles of Dominican life which I shall refer to as the Angelo syndrome and the Peter Pan syndrome. J. M. Barrie being better known in England than Shakespeare, I should explain that the Angelo I have in mind is the Duke's deputy in *Measure for Measure*,

a man whose blood  
Is very snow-broth; one who never feels  
The wanton stings and motions of the sense,  
But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge  
With profits of the mind, study and fast.

The precariousness of this Angelism is central to the play; we soon see the austere figure promising Isabella her brother's life in return for her surrender to his craving. I am not suggesting that Angelo is a portrait of any Dominican, living or dead, not merely because our Angelic figures are less prone to solicitation but also because they are less prone to study and penance. But an Angelo-image often seems discernible behind some of the exhortations to seriousness in the Dominican tradition. The Peter Pan syndrome is even more familiar among English Dominicans. Its more attractive features are a readiness to accept and produce the novel and the unexpected, a distaste for the merely conventional, an openness to the underworld, a refusal to confuse seriousness with solemnity. The less attractive features, perhaps inseparable from the more attractive ones, tend to a cult of squalid and irresponsible Bohemianism, pretending to seriousness in virtue merely of habitual departure from the common order. A habitual regard for the common order may easily harden into an inert and timid formalism, but this alone is hardly sufficient ground for habitually disregarding it. One simple criterion, though by no means the only one, which will allow us to discriminate between the more and the less attractive features of our Peter-pannishness is to enquire of ourselves just how costing is the word or gesture or action we are on the brink of. It is easy and cheap to cock a snook at the English hierarchy, for instance, while quite possibly maintaining the high line of Vatican II on the bishops; it may even be necessary to do just this from time to time just to keep sane; but the Christianity of an ingroup intelligentsia is just as much a distortion of the Gospel as a Christianity of the clerical establishment. The whole of I Corinthians, with its discrimination between wisdoms and enthusiasms, is appropriate here; I am sure that as I write and read the words of this paper I must remind myself that 'the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power' (4, v. 20).

Yet it is precisely in our talk, our service of the Word, that we are called to exhibit the transcendence of God; our language *has to be*

the form of our life. 'For God is my witness, to whom I render religious service (*latreuo*) in preaching the gospel of his Son . . .' (Rom. 1, v. 9). St Paul's use of the language of religious cult in which to formulate his self-consciousness as apostle has been carefully studied and seems to me of capital interest for anyone concerned for the Dominican religious vocation in a secularist age. The use of the language of cult to articulate the apostolic self-consciousness is itself one instance of the generally Pauline, and indeed New Testament, re-interpretation of religiousness as a worship in spirit and truth; so for example St Paul bows his knees in thanksgiving and petition to the Father of *agape* (Eph. 3, v. 14 f.). This is by no means a worship in the head or a metaphorical dodge but a trans-figuring of the body, an anticipated resurrection witnessed to in an evangelism of style of life as well as of word. At the same time it seems to me an inescapable truth that the Christian witness to the world within a sacramental economy which awaits its own withering away in the general renewal of all things must accept, together with its responsibility for institutional signs of eschatological renewal, a real and definite limitation and even impoverishment of human creativity. The token of this exchange and mutual dependence of Church and world is the Cross: 'So death is at work in us, but life in you' (2 Cor. 4, v. 12). 'For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong' (2 Cor. 13, v. 9). Clericalism is the kenosis by which we take on the form of the servant. As clerics we need the laity, as Christians we need non-Christians: the non-Christian, the autonomously human in ourselves has to submit to the cross of the institutional sign of Christ's redemptive work, and in this sense fill out by representation and in reality here and now what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of the Church of which we have become ministers, making the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden from past ages but now made manifest (cf. Col. 1, v. 24-26). It seems to me of the utmost importance not to confuse this 'economic' need for dialogue and mutuality with the autonomously human in the world, with a congenital weakness, moral and psychological in character, which cannot endure the institutional sign of the cross of Christ, the yoke of the servant. There is a yearning for secularist achievement which is no more than a symptom of vital debility.

Fundamental to this revaluation of the religious in Christian faith and love is the sense of its eschatological conclusiveness in a world still open to continuous (and discontinuous) change and evolution. The revaluation of sacrifice as human death and resurrection is an ultimate, but an ultimate which needs constantly to be refigured in human historical change, to be shown there for the ultimate, consummation *and* crisis, that it is. This is a *task*; for a house of studies a task of contemplative engagement. The common task of this house of studies is so contemplatively to sketch a horizon that the world in which we are engaged may disclose its significance

in the archetypal mystery of God. We find our own significance by disclosing (by seeking to disclose) the significance of the world.

It is absolutely manifest that this task, involving as it does a sustained sense of the seriousness of God's destiny for man in Christ, ineluctably demands a personal and communal discipline: not an extrinsic discipline but one intrinsic to the task itself. It is clear that this discipline has historically been formulated as a monastic or quasi-monastic code of prayer and silence, acquiring its intelligibility from the task with a view to which it was formulated and observed. It is clear that this code is being found increasingly unintelligible, cripplingly restrictive and unadapted to the given task. Here the realm of clarity ends. For on the one hand the nature of the task itself has become increasingly obscured (consider, for instance, those Dutch Dominican novices who sought and obtained permission to study agriculture instead of theology so as to work in underdeveloped countries); and on the other, and partly as a consequence, the progressive erosion of the monastic code has led to a deterioration of commitment to the task which quite frequently shows itself as moral flaccidity and nihilism. Speaking as one for whom the code used to provide a tolerable and convenient context for what, subjectively felt, didn't seem a wholly insignificant life, but speaking also as one who freely recognizes that an increasing number of his fellow-Dominicans find that code intolerable, inconvenient and trivial, I ask with some passion (if I may) just what is being conceived of as a way of life which will continue to carry the seriousness of genuine and enduring commitment. For it is simply naive to suppose that mere private spontaneity or endless discussion will do. Into whatever form of communal religious endeavour we are emerging, whatever long revolution of underworlds is labouring for birth in us in that *Seinsgeschichte* in which we share, I do believe that the Dominican service of the sacrificial word of God has its continuing intrinsic significance in that revolution, and that this service and task demands its sacrificial discipline. Not unreasonably in our day, we look for our hagiography not in the lives of the martyrs but of those others, non-violent freedom marchers it may be, who have dedicated themselves to the emancipation of an underworld. At least one of the themes of primitive monasticism was an endeavour to represent the martyr in the idiom of engagement with the devil in the desert. I am not clear what new idiom of dedication is being suggested by the new hagiography, though I do recognize that some of the emergent forms of community life, the common service of the table, for instance, embody a discipline of mutual charity, which I at least find quite as demanding as the service of the capuce (also, quaintly enough, an item in a discipline of charity directed to the construction of a common order by way of the construction of a common sign).

It is not however my business here to do more than raise the

question of what in general would be the appropriate structure of discipline in view of the Dominican service of the Word. It is clear to me that the question cannot be answered by the absolute imposition of authority from above, but only by a dialogue between *all* the members of the Dominican community on the one hand (as a common 'laity' or Dominican people of God) and those members on the other hand (the distinction therefore not being exclusive) who have the authority to witness to tradition, to send out in mission, and in the last resort to guarantee witness and mission by sanction. My business here is to insist that study as engaged contemplation intrinsically requires study as personal and communal discipline. Such a discipline would seem to be the very structure of the engagement. A beautiful simplicity has never seemed to me one of the Dominican excellencies, any more than the role of the charismatic Fool. And yet evangelical simplicity has to be allowed to warm and sustain sophistication, and fantasy and charism must not be driven underground. Every academic institution, simply by promoting a discipline of study, tends to be a killer of the dream. It may be that the academic institution by itself cannot hope to overcome its own built-in imbalance, though the provision of opportunities for some personally creative work in essays and seminars may help. But every academic institution needs its wider human context, in such a house as this primarily the local community. If one cannot expect of academic discipline that it contribute to every need of the whole man, one can at least demand of it that it does not smother growth and transcendence and so breed nihilism and apathy, remembering always that an essential need of the whole man is some fixed point of reference and some commonly accepted public order.

The significant life of a Dominican house of studies then consists primarily in the discernment and construction of significance, of meanings, in the face of the Meaning of meanings to which—to whom—it is consecrated. Without a common awareness of the presence of ultimate Meaning amongst us the search for meaning itself becomes meaningless; yet the common awareness itself can only rise through a common search. 'You would not seek me unless you had already found me.' *Nisi credideritis, non intelligetis*. Perhaps that Meaning has always to be found in contradiction; it is certainly how it has to be sought today, in Europe, in Oxford, at Blackfriars. Writing in India the introduction to his *Christian Ashram* Bede Griffiths says:

It is this experience of Christ as the ground of all being which must be the inspiration of a Christian monasticism. For this means that in Christ we not only discover the centre or ground of our being, but we also find a meeting point with all other men and with the whole world of nature. There is a discipline of silence and solitude which is necessary for the discovery of this inner centre of our being. But this separation should not divide a monk from the

world but on the contrary enable him to meet the world at the deepest level of its being. 'A monk is one who separates himself from all men in order that he may be united with all men', was one of the sayings of the monastic fathers (p. 25).

Griffiths goes on immediately to speak of the problem of poverty in India; and one may feel that contemplation as he describes it is possible only in a subsistence economy where the 'world of nature' has not yet been assumed into history by the accelerator of technological advance. We, on the contrary, live in a world of history; and our problem is to find a centre of being in becoming (let the nonsense stand): our contemplation has to be in some sense Dionysiac rather than Apollonian, an identification with, by free surrender in faith to, the mysterion of God's destiny for mankind. I do believe (and here I stand) that without some such contemplative dimension and the discipline it involves there can be no significant life in this house of studies or indeed in any Dominican house.

One last word, so as to end if not exactly with a whimper at least not with an inappropriate bang. The lectors and students we have are the lectors and students we are. We may be witting or unwitting actors in a dramatic universe but we bear our treasure in earthen vessels. This is even the point of the drama: 'We bear our treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us' (2 Cor. 4, v. 7).