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Thank you, Sisters, for your gracious invitation and I hope that I can provide a few words of insight as you gather as formators.

I want to concentrate on three aspects of the Dominican family that we should be passing on to our younger brothers and sisters in the Dominican family. The first is the confidence of our Holy Father Saint Dominic, a spirit of courage as Dominicans, and finally the vows as a source of joy.

Of course, there are many other aspects of our lives we must pass on and teach our novices and temporary vowed brothers and sisters, but these are thoughts that have come to my mind in this Jubilee year of Saint Dominic's "dies natalis".

Confidence of Saint Dominic

Saint Dominic was not a pessimist. We see this clearly in his preaching against the Albigensians, who believed that God did not create material things. He saw the flaw in this belief and preached the opposite: God created us, both body and soul. Not only has he wondrously made us, but he even more wondrously redeemed us, the *whole* of us. Dominic held fast to this notion in his preaching and in the Order, he founded: we can have confidence in the human person because of our confidence in God.

How do Dominicans understand this idea of confidence? How do we pass this on to our young brothers and sisters? Following in the steps of St. Dominic, we have hope in God's plan for each Dominican and confidence that God has called him or her to the Order for a reason. The Fundamental Constitution of the Order expresses this hope well:

"Because of the Order's mission, personal talents and a sense of responsibility are especially esteemed and cultivated by the brothers. After the completion of his formation, each brother is treated as an adult, competent to teach others and take on various responsibilities in the Order" (Fundamental Constitution, VI).

An encouraging example of this confidence is the preservation of our Order, even as we adapt our way of life:

The Order's fundamental purpose and way of life which follows from it retains their worth in every age of the Church's existence. In such circumstances it is for the Order

to renew itself and adapt itself courageously, discerning and testing the elements which are good and useful in humanity's aspirations, taking them into the unchangeable equilibrium of the fundamental elements of its life. (Fundamental Constitutions, VIII)

We may still ask ourselves, "Have we adapted enough, or too much?" These are questions that are worth asking, but we can diffuse our concern when we see the Holy Spirit at work in us and our superiors. This confidence is not presumptuous. It is a recognition of the primacy of God's grace. This grace gives Dominican life a kind of liberty conducive to growth and maturity as we follow Christ. This confidence is what led the early friars to preach, and it is what motivates us today. For over 800 years, we have been compelled by grace to preach because we want to help others experience this same confidence in God's plan for their lives.

Today's culture especially needs this preaching because there is a popular idea that opposes this notion of confidence: excessive self-confidence. You can find this idea in any self-help section of a bookstore. "Just be the best version of you that you can be, and that's enough."

God's plan is not just superficial self-improvement. Virtue is not its own reward. He does not want us to "spruce up" our nature like putting the icing on a cake. Instead, he wants to elevate our nature, ultimately to communion with himself. Our confidence in his plan does not rest within ourselves, but in the power of God's grace working in us (see [Phil 4:13](#); [2 Tim 1:6-7](#)).

Excessive self-confidence leads many people to look inward at the cost of losing sight of their end: God. Confidence in ourselves apart from God is not confidence. Ironically, when we engage in this God-less introspection, we do not go deep enough. We do not tap into the confidence of St. Dominic. Not only does God have a plan for us, but he also dwells in our souls. This awareness of the divine indwelling should spark a well-ordered hope, with confidence and compunction as we see how poorly we bear his image.

Recognizing this indwelling also sheds light on a Dominican motto: *Contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere* (To contemplate and to give others what has been contemplated). It follows perfectly from the confidence of St. Dominic. He preached for the salvation of souls because he recognized the One dwelling within them. He contemplated this divine image found in the human person, and he confidently preached the One he contemplated. He set the world ablaze with this truth: "I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6).

This confidence is the source of our passion to preach and serve...this is the confidence we must pass on to our young brothers and sisters.

The Spirit of Courage of Saint Dominic

I realize that in Europe and throughout the regions we serve we have beautiful images of Dominic and his life, but this stain glass window stuck me, on a particularly bright sunny morning.

That day the light of the morning sun passed through eight stained glass windows in the chapel of the Priory of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C. They narrate the life of Saint Dominic in medieval fashion: using light, not words. The fourth of these windows encapsulates the Dominican *forma vitae*. In it, Dominic disperses the brothers, sending them forth from the cradle of the Order in southern France to the centers of learning throughout Europe. He sends them forth *to preach*. What the window illustrates so well, however, is all that precedes the preaching of the Dominican friar.

There is an appointed time for everything ... a time to be silent, and a time to speak. (Eccl 3:1a, 7b)

Fourteen friars are depicted in the window. Not one is speaking. The very context of the life of the friar preacher is *silence*, the source of holy preaching. "*Silentium est pater praedicatorum*" Silence is the father of preachers." In silence, the Dominican hears the God's voice. This silence is found principally in our community, where prayer, study, and the common life equip us to proclaim the Word to those outside its walls of our convents and houses. The Dominicans are dispersed from the silence of their community.

Silence is the attribute that our young people need to appreciate and savor.

After this the Lord appointed seventy[-two] others whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit. (Luke 10:1)

The Dominicans are sent by the Order, but not on individual missions. The Dominican is no soloist. He is a brother or sister, (a *frater*, a *soror*) and thus is a one who is in relation to others. St. Dominic was always accompanied by one or two brothers. Abroad, they preach together. At home, they eat and pray together. In chapter, they admitted their faults to one another. They pursued souls together. They sought holiness together.

In the center of the scene in the stain glass window, a kneeling friar kissing Dominic's cappa. The earliest brothers were devoted to Holy Father Dominic. That devotion continues to this day. The Dominicans profess obedience to Dominic. We pray for his intercession. The Dominican, with great trust, accepts the mission and form of life given by Dominic.

The salvation and care of souls depends on preaching. Before preaching, however, comes *sending*. A preacher must be sent, for "no one can give themselves the mandate and the mission to proclaim the Gospel". Christ sent his Apostles to preach (Luke 9:1-2). They, in turn, sent their successors, the bishops. Bishops, finally, commission others to preach on their behalf. At the dispersal of 1217, Dominic sent his

sons to preach. This continues throughout our Dominican family. Each one of us is sent to preach!

But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!" (Rom 10:14-15)

By what authority did Dominic send them? Only months before the dispersal, the holy founder had acquired a revolutionary papal bull from Honorius III which conferred the title "preacher" on all the followers in Dominic's fledgling company.

For the first time in the Church, the canonical mission without which there is no, authentic preacher of the Gospel, would no longer be conferred by the bishop, but incorporation in a society, explicitly confirmed in this function by the Pope.
(Henri Vicaire, Saint Dominic and His Times, page 224)

According to the *Legend* of Constantino d'Orvieto, Dominic had a vision of Saints Peter and Paul while he was in Rome to receive this and other bulls. In the vision, St. Peter gave him the staff of a messenger and St. Paul gave him a book symbolizing doctrine. They told him, "Go and preach!" The chapel window unites the letter of Honorius's bull to the spirit of Dominic's vision. Dominic no longer carries the staff and book. He has given them to his sons, who will travel the world and offer learned preaching to souls.

The Dominican *forma vitae* gives rise to Dominican preaching. Out of silence, in fraternity and in sorority, and with devotion to Holy Father Dominic, the Dominican is sent to be a preacher of the Word.

In silence and community, as brothers and sisters, we receive and mature into the courage to preach.

The Vows of Joy

When we make vows in the Order, we are asked, I believe this is true for the apostolic sisters, "What do you seek?" The Lord assures us that if we seek, we shall find: God's mercy and the mercy of the brothers and sisters.

I suppose that both are given, but that it takes time for us to penetrate the depths of that mercy, to make it our own in such a way that we too become merciful, compassionate. We also commit ourselves to the search for ways to bring that mercy to others. Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.

It is very rare to ask publicly for mercy, for forgiveness, particularly when you are not conscious of having done something wrong, or of having failed in a very obvious way. When we ask for it, we make a public profession not only that we need mercy, but also that we desire it with all our hearts. We hope to be surrounded with mercy as if it is the air that we breathe.

In asking for God's mercy, we are also confessing that it will be brought to us in a particular way of life. Through being members of the Order of Preachers, we believe we will come to know the mercy of God. The experience and certainty of God's mercy will be in the context of a particular tradition within the Church, the Dominican way. God's mercy, which is ever faithful, ever sure, will be communicated through a group of people whose mercy is not always so sure and who, because of human sin, are not always as merciful as they might or should be.

But then that is true of every religious group, all are to a greater or lesser extent marked by human failure, by pettiness, by selfishness, by spite, by lack of imagination, by lack of hope and vision.

When the Order was founded, the work of preaching was laid upon it in remission of sins – to save souls. It was to be an instrument of divine forgiveness. The Dominican family was also to have their own sins forgiven by the work of preaching. We do not preach because we are holy, we preach to become holy, we are to be converted by **the Word we preach**.

The Order is the space of conversion. When we make our vow to stay in it, we lay our hearts open to be ploughed by the loving ruthlessness of God's grace, and so they are harrowed and planted, in them does he sow and from them does he reap.

Every day the preacher is confronted by the word he preaches, that Word, which in all its truth and beauty, cuts more finely than any double-edged sword, probing, exposing, all those areas of our life which, in our anxiety and shame, we keep hidden from each other, but which cannot hide from the glorious scrutiny of God's truth.

In a way the question is somewhat a trick question, although it appears simple: "What do you seek?" We often imagine that we are the fearless spiritual explorers who bravely go in search of the hidden God. This is to get things the wrong way round. Why do we seek God? Is it because he is lost? God, in his mystery, is eternal, never changing, always present, always new. If God is not lost, it must be we who are lost.

Any kind of vocation, but especially a religious vocation, is the experience of being found and placed by God. When we get older, we find that we often lose things, sometimes quite important things, and always at the wrong time, like the car keys when we are just about to start out on an important journey, or our passports. We sometimes talk about these things as disappearing miraculously. We know that things do not disappear, sometimes they are right under our noses, they are obvious, but we cannot see them because they are in the wrong place, they are in the wrong context.

In the same sort of way, we can walk right past people that we know quite well without recognizing them, because they are not in their usual surroundings. It can be the same with lost things and lost people, they are still there, but they are in the wrong place. In order to make sense, in order to flourish, they have to be put in the right place. It is not we who seek God but God who seeks us and finds us and places us correctly.

St Catherine of Siena talks about the Order as the garden. It is, in a sense, a kind of foretaste of the paradise garden. That is why we live a vowed life or try to live a vowed life. It is not that these vows are our passport to paradise, we do not think that if we concentrate on keeping them to the exclusion of all else then we shall be found worthy of glory.

Our religious lives are not our own works of art, to have any value they have to be God's creation. The vows are meant to make a space for God's grace to work in the individuality of our own particular and personal biographies, transforming them from within, opening them out to a greater potentiality than would otherwise have been possible.

When we live them to the full, we dedicate ourselves to living a fairly uncluttered life, a spacious life. Our lives need to be spacious because they are also points of encounter, of meeting. If we are to be instruments of the Lord's mercy, then others will meet him through us.

It is the Lord who welcomes the traveler, it is the Lord who gives them rest, and it is in the inn of our own lives, like the inn of the Good Samaritan, that he offers that rest and nursing back to health which is the experience of mercy. Our vows do not cut us off from the people of God, they draw us closer to them, they are the charter of welcome to all of those who genuinely seek God and who are brought to him through us.

It is God who finds us. "What do you seek?" You and I answer in a roundabout way, "God." You would not be seeking him unless you had already found him, or rather if he had not found you and placed you in this Dominican garden where you can join all of the other rich and exotic flowers and plants. Conversion is that experience of allowing ourselves to be found by God.

St Catherine says St Dominic's garden is broad, generous, and sweet. It is a spacious garden. The paradise garden was the place where Adam and Eve in their innocence walked and talked with God. It was also the place where they first tried to hide from God, because they knew that they were naked, vulnerable, defenseless. They tried to hide and to cover themselves up.

To make a vow is to uncover, to make yourself vulnerable, it is to offer what is most precious, one's own protection and security, one's own life, to him who gave it and who nourishes it and cherishes it. The vows are our offering of our lives to him who is the author of all life, that he may bring that life to others through that offering.

A garden is supposed to give delight. It is to be a place of pleasure and a place of meeting, a shared delight. I am always struck when reading the Lives of the Brethren, and through having lived this life for thirty-four years now, by the particular quality of Dominican joy. St Catherine says that St Dominic's garden is marked by its diversity. God could well have made us in such a way that we all had everything, but he preferred to give different gifts to different people, so that they would all need each other.

You are not joining a uniform, monochromatic institution, but a garden filled with rich and exotic flowers and plants, home to many rare birds of paradise. Catherine shares the Lord's delight in the diversity of what he has made. God saw all that he had made and saw that it was good. The divine simplicity issues in the complexity of diversity. God delights in human complexity, in difference. So, we should delight in it too.

The only reason for staying in this life is if it makes you happy. When Father Bede Jarrett, the famous English Dominican, was asked why he joined the Order he always answered because I wanted to, and when asked why he remained in it he said that it brought him happiness. Our lives should be marked by joy.

A story is told about Blessed Jordan of Saxony that when he was going with a crowd of friars to a General Chapter in Paris, he sent out the brethren to beg for their food, telling them to reassemble at a certain spring nearby. They brought back a small quantity of coarse bread, which would hardly be enough for four people. Jordan broke out into a song of joy and praise and encouraged the brethren by his word and his example to do the same.

A woman in the neighborhood saw them and was scandalized. She said to them, "If you are religious, why are you making merry like this so early in the day?" But when she learned that it was because they were short of bread that they were exulting in the Lord, for whose sake they had chosen to be poor, she ran home and fetched them bread and wine and cheese, recommending herself to their prayers.

The vows are meant to clear the space for joy to possess us. The Lord wants joyful apostles not unfriendly bondservants. We must teach our novices and temporary professed that if God has found them and placed them in St. Dominic's garden, that is a cause for joy. This is the joy we want to see in those that we form and prepare for the mission of preaching and service as Dominicans.