

## What breed are British Dogs of the Lord?

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### Abstract

In the nineteen sixties, when the author became a Dominican, the province went through a profound crisis. This article asks how it was able to survive this crisis and find new life and vigour. It did so because the brethren were usually able to engage in constructive dialogue. This was due to three characteristics of the province. As British, it embraced diversity in its core; the intellectual tradition of the province, an open Thomism, pushed it beyond any simplistic opposition between the tradition and progress. There is a tradition of brotherhood often overflowing into friendship which held the brethren together in times of crisis.

### Keywords

Religious Life, St Thomas Aquinas, Friendship, opposition to war

Since those first Dominican brothers arrived in Oxford 800 hundred years ago, the Province they founded has lived through several crises, principally the Black Death in the fourteenth century and the Reformation, which almost lead to its extinction. When I was clothed as a novice in September 1965, along with eleven others, I had no idea that it was entering its latest crisis. We had three novice masters during that year, two of whom left to get married. At the beginning of the year there were 42 brethren in initial formation and by the end only nine. The following year there were no novices. It looked as if the province might not survive.

This 'time of anguish', in the words of the then-provincial, Ian Hislop, continued for decades but fifty-six years later we are still here. The province is smaller, but appears to have a future. In December 2020, with an average age of fifty-six, 'twenty men were aged seventy or above; twenty-eight men were aged between fifty and sixty-nine; and twenty-seven men were aged between thirty and forty-nine, with

a further five under thirty'.<sup>1</sup> How is it that, despite the crisis that has engulfed religious life in the West, this province is emerging with relative strength and with good grounds for hope?

Dominicans are often called 'the Dogs of the Lord', *Domini canes*. The British Dogs of the Lord have qualities and a tradition which enabled us to transcend the crisis that threatened our very existence in the mid-sixties. Not all of my brethren will have the same understanding of our vocation, and none of us realises it perfectly, but I hope my portrayal of our British way of being Dominican represents an aspiration with which most will be able to identify. I am indebted to Richard Finn OP's forthcoming history of the province<sup>2</sup> and to Aidan Nichols OP's *Dominican Gallery*.<sup>3</sup> I have freely mined these books in support of my understanding of the tradition and nature of our Province.

### Conversation

Fergus Kerr OP asserted that '1965-66 was the nadir in the history'<sup>4</sup> of Blackfriars, Oxford. When I was assigned there in the summer of 1967, after the closure of the priory in the Midlands where we had studied philosophy, the community was in a dire state. The common life was fragmented, the liturgy impoverished and the studies disorganised. The revival of the community was to a considerable extent due to the commitment of successive priors to weekly community meetings during which we openly faced the challenges of remaking our common life and mission. It was above all Fergus, prior from 1969 to 1978, who patiently guided the community through the long and painful process of renewal.

At the Provincial Chapter of 1996, he said: 'If you ask me to say what I prize more and more the longer I am in the Order (and it will be 40 years this September) then I have to say that it is a way of thinking – of expecting other people to have views we may disagree with; expecting also to be able to understand why they believe what they do – if only we have the imagination, the courage, the faith in the ultimate power of the truth, the charity to listen to what others say, to listen especially for what they are afraid of when they seem reluctant to accept what we want them to see'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Richard Finn OP, *Friars Preachers: The Several Makings of an English Dominican Province, 1221 - 2021*.

<sup>2</sup> C.f. footnote 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Dominican Gallery: Portrait of a culture* (Leominster, Gracewing, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> F. Kerr 'Report on the State of Blackfriars Oxford', March 18<sup>th</sup> 1970, Quoted by Finn, chapter 8.

<sup>5</sup> Acts of the Provincial Chapter 1996.

Dominican government is ‘communitarian’, which is to say that the major decisions are taken in chapters: general, provincial or conventual. Dominicans take only one vow, of obedience. This is most fundamentally an obedience to the decisions of the brethren made in chapter. As is evident from Fergus’ words, this is not a blind submission of the will, but a work of charity, imagination, and intelligence. Herbert McCabe, a vocal participant in the debates of the community, wrote that ‘the notion of blind obedience makes no more sense in our tradition than would blind learning’.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of visitations of the provinces by the Master or of priorities by the provincial is not to impose decisions on them, but to help them take good decisions in their own chapters, provincial and conventual. Above all the task is to verify the quality of the dialogue of the brethren when making decisions: Are the challenges of the day honestly discussed? Do the brethren dare to speak openly? Is there a minority which is unheeded or factions that are unable to talk to each other? Are the young allowed to speak or the old ignored? What processes might be proposed to renew their conversation?

This cultivation of conversation, intelligently addressing disagreement and seeking consensus, is counter-cultural in the digital world which steers people towards the echo chambers of the like-minded, and erodes nuance through tweets and truncated slogans. This promotes ideological conflicts in which opposing views are dismissed or ridiculed. Church, too, is afflicted by the stupidity of the culture wars, pitting left against right, tradition against progress, in a way that should be alien to Catholicism. So Dominican government constantly struggles to resist the pressures of the *Zeitgeist*, to keep our hearts and minds open to brothers who think differently, and whose voices must be heard in our debates.

I have attended almost every General Chapter of the Order since 1989, occurring every three years. There have been, though rarely, fierce conflicts with a few brethren opting for a narrow ideology of the right or the left, but the conversation has never entirely broken down, and at the last General Chapter, at Bien Hoa in Vietnam in 2019, there was a new sense of peace. By no means unanimity, for healthy disagreement persists as it always will and should, but there was the charity, the imagination, and the intellectual openness to seek a way forward together in obedience to the Spirit.

How was it that, in that ‘time of anguish’, we were able to begin the painfully slow business of restoring our common life and mission at Blackfriars and in the province? What were the imaginative and intellectual resources that enabled us to listen to each other, at least most of the time, and tentatively edge towards concord and consensus?

<sup>6</sup> *God Matters* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1987) p. 229.

I will propose three factors which are so deeply intertwined that it is hard to separate them. There is a cultural diversity which has mitigated against more extreme forms of ideological combat; there was an intellectual tradition that has always pushed us beyond any simple opposition between tradition and progress, and our brotherhood frequently overflows into friendship.

### A British Province

The origins of the Order of Preachers lie in St Dominic's preaching to the Albigensian heretics in the south of France who believed that the world was the battle ground between two divine principles, associated with the spiritual and material realms. Salvation is the liberation of the spirit from bodily imprisonment. St Dominic preached the Word made flesh in a particular Jewish man two thousand years ago. Our faith seeks embodiment in particularity. David Jones, the lay Dominican, wrote:

Christ died  
On this hill  
At a time's turn  
Not on any hill  
But on this hill.<sup>7</sup>

The gospel is universal but all preaching seeks to bring the faith to birth in particular cultures, both embracing and challenging them. The vision of Bede Jarrett, provincial for sixteen years in the early twentieth century, still shapes the province today. For him all preaching was the evangelisation of culture. Our faith must become incarnate in our buildings, our art and music, our loves and our lives. Maisie Ward's foreword to *The English Way*, which included essays by several Dominicans, wrote: 'Because it [Christianity] is universal it is in every country, but because it is sacramental it is intensely local, found in every country in a special and unique fashion, not a spirit only but a spirit clothed in material form'.<sup>8</sup>

Bede cherished Englishness. Gervase Mathew OP wrote of him that: 'traditions of public service absorbed since childhood gave him a sympathy with all that was essentially English in the non-Catholic official world'.<sup>9</sup> The refoundation of Blackfriars in Oxford was the keystone of Bede's vision of a renewed English Province rooted in a university at the heart of English culture. Here, in a building fronted with the local Cotswold stone, the brethren would witness to an older

<sup>7</sup> David, Jones, *The Anathemata*, (London, Faber and Faber, 1952) p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> M. Ward (ed), *The English Way: Studies in English Sanctity from St Bede to Newman* (London, Sheed and Ward, 1933), Foreword. Quoted by Nichols p. 293.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Nichols p. 292.

preformation England, the deep soil of our culture. The brethren ‘wearing the habit, and able to carry out in choir the monastic observances and chant, would be able to influence happily even the non-Catholic undergraduate in such a university, where still linger so much fragrance of her Catholic past’.<sup>10</sup>

This vision of a truly English Catholicism was transmitted to the next generation. Conrad Pepler OP, a student at Blackfriars during the last two years of Bede’s life, while he was still Prior, wrote a study of pre-Reformation English mystics, *The English Religious Heritage*. He believed that Catholicism in England had become in our time largely foreign: ‘It lacks the local ingredients which long experience has taught the locals they need’. We need ‘an indigenous spiritual life growing up from the soil of England these several centuries and thrusting out into the universal spirituality of the Church of God’.<sup>11</sup>

When Gervase Mathew joined the Order, Bede gave his mother a copy of his *The Life of St Dominic*,<sup>12</sup> prophesying that ‘his courage and happy laughter’ would set people’s hearts on fire. For Gervase, Englishness represented ‘a cluster of virtues of its own: constancy, balance in judgment, candour in personal relationships, and in religion a strong, not mawkish devotion’.<sup>13</sup>

Bede Jarrett also dreamt of a refounded Scottish province. In 1932, the year in which young Conrad came to Oxford, a community of three brethren was opened in Edinburgh. It was to be the base for lectures in the university and more widely. Bede dreamt that eventually it would become ‘the study house of a future Scottish province’.<sup>14</sup> It attracted to the Order some extraordinary figures, such as Anthony Ross OP, who was Rector of Edinburgh University between 1979 and 1982. A Scottish noviciate was opened there in 1980 but the dream of independence began to fade and in 1988 it became the sole noviciate for the whole Province. Now our presence is reduced almost to what it was in 1932, one small community and a few scattered brethren. Likewise hopes for a Caribbean Province have risen and fallen, with proposals for the merger of the various vicariates of different mother provinces so far unfulfilled.

In South Africa, Bede’s dream of a Dominican life embedded in the local culture came closer to realisation. He established a community at Stellenbosch, the heart of Boer civilisation and the guardian of the Dutch Reformed tradition which was, he wrote to Robert Bracey OP, ‘the great external enemy of the Catholic Church in S. Africa. We

<sup>10</sup> K. Wykeham-George OP and G. Mathew, OP. *Bede Jarrett of the Order of Preachers*, (London, Blackfriars Publications, 1952) pp. 94 – 95.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted Nichols p. 366.

<sup>12</sup> *Life of St Dominic (1170 – 1221)* (London, Burns Oates and Washbourne Lt, 1924).

<sup>13</sup> Nichols p. 293.

<sup>14</sup> Provincial’s diary for 24 December 1931, Quoted by Finn. Chapter 7.

should be in the thick of the fight'.<sup>15</sup> The aim was to be both inculturated and counter-cultural, as in Oxford and Edinburgh. The Order in South Africa ceased to be a part of our Province when the English and Dutch vicariates merged to form the independent General Vicariate of South Africa in February 1968. This played a small but significant role in opposition to Apartheid. Albert Nolan OP was elected Master of the Order in 1983 but refused to accept, on the grounds that he must remain in his own country to continue the combat. The priory at Stellenbosch was eventually closed but a South African Vice Province of 35 brethren bodes well for the future.

So Bede Jarrett's dream of the English Province as the begetter of Scottish and Caribbean Provinces has not yet come to pass. This has been the experience of the Order more widely. Small bands of brethren were despatched from European provinces to new missions with the expectation that before long they would mature into independent provinces. This so often failed to happen that the organisational structure of the Order was reconfigured in 2010.

In the case of the English Province – Provinces usually retain the name given at their foundation – this has been a blessing. We have remained a British Province, with the contrast of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon cultures at the core of our identity and an abiding presence in the Caribbean. It would be hard to imagine how the Province could have survived, let alone flourished, without the presence of Scots such as Ian Hislop and Anthony Ross, both Provincials, and above all Fergus Kerr, all three converts. The current editor of *New Blackfriars* and my own prior in Oxford are both Welsh. Many provinces are more international than ours. The Province of France has vicariates in Scandinavia, the Baltics, the Middle East, and Africa. The Spanish Province of the Holy Rosary is becoming ever more Asian. But our province is uniquely multicultural in its essence, which would not have been the case if Bede's dream had been realised.

In addition, we embrace the disparate elements of British Catholicism; only a whiff of the old recusant British Catholicism, but with many brethren who are converts or the descendants of Irish immigrants. Perhaps this Catholic community, so culturally and socially diverse, hung together in part because it was a small minority in a Protestant country, which had endured centuries of persecution and discrimination. It was only by transcending differences of class and culture that Catholicism could survive in this hostile environment. This sheer cultural complexity has surely helped the Province to welcome novices from all over the world, who often came to Britain for university studies, such as Cornelius Ernst of Dutch and Sri Lankan parentage. Most

<sup>15</sup> Letter of February 12th 1930 from Jarret to Fr R. Bracey, Quoted by Finn, Chapter 7.

of the superiors of the communities of the Province, at the time of writing, are not English.

When the Oxford community was in the depths of that crisis in the mid-sixties, we were able to begin to converse with each other in part because a community of Scots, Welsh, Irish, and English, of converts and cradle Catholics, was unlikely to be imprisoned by any simplistic discourse, seeking to impose a uniform view of the left or the right. There was also a typically British distrust of any ideological straight-jacket. The province was enormously indebted to scholarly brethren of the province of France, such as Marie-Dominique Chenu and Yves Congar. They were at the forefront of the renewal of the Church at the Vatican Council. They were our masters, and our students were sent to study under them, but during my year of studies in Paris I was struck by the repeated phrase of my French brethren: *'il faut être coherent'*<sup>16</sup> Radical coherence seemed a rather implausible goal for such a mixed bunch as the British Mongrels of the Lord.

### A Progressive and Pastoral Tradition

In the West conversation within the Church has often broken down because of a chasm between traditionalists and progressives. Especially in America, each has its own entrenched party agenda, its heroes and villains, its websites and even its popes. Like the Corinthians to whom Paul wrote, some say, "I belong to Paul", or "I belong to Apollos", or "I belong to Cephas", or "I belong to Christ". Is Christ divided?" (1 Corinthians 1.12).

Conversation continued in our province, even in the most dismal moments, because a radical opposition between the tradition and newness was never accepted. The brethren varied in where they were located in a spectrum from left to right but there was enough of a shared tradition usually to make dialogue possible. We are the heirs to the theological vision of St Thomas Aquinas but it was a Thomism, if it can be so called, that was always in evolution, grappling with new questions, open to fresh insights. It impelled us towards a theology incarnate in new and diverse cultures. It was as varied in articulation as the brethren, but with a spacious openness to all that was human.

An influential exponent of this was Thomas Gilby, the editor of the 61 volume translation and commentary on the *Summa Theologica*, published by Eyre and Spottiswood, the first volume of which appeared in 1964. In an article in *New Blackfriars* he explained that its purpose was to 'maintain the authentic mode of systematic theology against

<sup>16</sup> One has to be consistent!

hardening from within and softening from without'.<sup>17</sup> This was a theology that was both strong and supple. Elsewhere he defined theology as 'the overspill of divine faith into all the levels of human reasonableness, its wit, humour, poetic imagination, sense of analogy, power of co-ordination, openness to be taught, and search for reason why, when, how, and what it is all about'.<sup>18</sup> Aidan Nichols even makes the wonderful claim that Gilby's novel contribution to the English Dominican tradition was 'treating Aquinas as fun'.<sup>19</sup>

During those difficult years at Blackfriars, three figures dominated the intellectual life of the province: Cornelius Ernst, Herbert McCabe and Fergus Kerr. They could not have been more different: a Ceylonese convert from atheism, though raised an Anglican; an Irish cradle Catholic from Yorkshire; and a Scottish convert who grew up not practising any faith.

They disagreed acutely about many things, especially the nature of religious life, as we shall see below, but they were all disciples of Aquinas, influenced by Wittgenstein, and cherished the role of poetry and literature in the search for truth and meaning. The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ gave Fergus his first whiff of a Catholic imagination. Cornelius insisted that the search for God must include 'the tradition of the human heart: novels, art, music, tragedy. I cannot allow that God can only be adored in spirit and in truth by the individual introverted upon himself and detached from all that might disturb and solicit his heart. It must be possible to find and adore God in the complexity of human experience'.<sup>20</sup>

Ernst claimed that at Cambridge, 'I began to learn how to reconcile freedom of the spirit with tradition...*Christians too were capable of intellectual exploration*' (his own emphasis).<sup>21</sup> For all three, Aquinas despatched them on an exploration of faith rather than providing a store of pre-digested answers. Ernst rejected the 'warmed-up scholasticism' that still to this day finds adherents. For McCabe, Aquinas's sanctity of mind is 'shown not in the many questions he marvellously, excitingly answered, but in the one where he failed, the question he did not and could not answer, and refused to pretend to answer':<sup>22</sup> What is God?

So, in a dire moment, here was a theological tradition which would not let us settle into a dumb and simplistic confrontation between conservative and progressive. We were able to talk to each other, though

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Gilby O.P., 'The "Summa" in the Sixties', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 46 no. 532 (October 1964), pp 6-10.

<sup>18</sup> 'Theology' in T. C. O'Brien and C. M. Aherne, S. S. J., (eds) *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Religion* (Washington, Corpus Publications, 1979) .3497. Quoted by Nichols. p. 199.

<sup>19</sup> Nichols p. 188.

<sup>20</sup> Fergus Kerr and Timothy Radcliffe (eds), Cornelius Ernst OP *Multiple Echo: Explorations in Theology*, London (Darton Longman and Todd, 1979) p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid* p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *God Matters*, (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1987) p. 236.

often with difficulty, and slowly rebuild a common life and mission. The Church has a profound need today for such a theological culture if she is to be liberated from the sterility of the culture wars and offer a word that is always new and old, ancient and modern.

It survived in Blackfriars because when many Dominican provinces were closing down their own study houses and sending their young friars to study in non-Dominican theology faculties, the English Province bravely kept our studium open, even though at one stage there were more teachers than students. This was largely the achievement of my fellow novice, Simon Tugwell, who tried to maintain a small *corpus professorum*, like the seed bank at Kew gardens, ready for when a new spring would come. He accepted non-Dominican students into the studium in the late seventies, and so Blackfriars slowly acquired credibility as a place of serious theological study, even in the eyes of our own Dominican brethren! In January 1994, it was accepted as a Permanent Private Hall of Oxford University. Bede Jarrett's dream came a step nearer to fulfilment. Recently two research institutes have been founded at Blackfriars: the Las Casas Institute for Social Justice, and the Aquinas Institute, which are helping the Order to engage more profoundly in debates on the theological, social, and political issues of our society.

This theological culture places no chasm between scholarship and pastoral care. The great doctrines of the Church are not obscure abstract speculation, the relics of ancient debates. They are liberating and transformative. Gerard Vann asserted that 'the doctrine of the Trinity is of immediate practical importance to us'.<sup>23</sup> When Vincent McNabb preached in the 1920s in the Aquinas Hall, attached to St Dominic's Priory in London, Nichols claims that 'they were quite possibly the first public Catholic theological lectures in England since the Reformation'.<sup>24</sup> When, fifty years later, Blackfriars was enduring what might have been terminal turmoil, some brethren stayed because our elders, such as Cornelius, Herbert, and Fergus, initiated us into the great unending adventure of exploring the great creedal truths of our faith. These are living doctrines that carried us through the emotional ups and downs of an uncertain time and which we burnt to share with our contemporaries.

This theological tradition is inherently pastoral. Academic study and pastoral care, teachers in Oxford and brethren ministering in the parishes, should nourish each other, since the Order was founded 'for preaching and the salvation of souls'.<sup>25</sup> Many of those teaching in Oxford, live in communities which run parishes. In the Order this dialogue between theology and pastoral experience is called 'the Salamanca

<sup>23</sup> 'Man's Response to the Trinity' in *The High Green Hill*, (London, Collins, 1951) p. 57.

<sup>24</sup> Nichols, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> The Fundamental Constitution of the Order. II.

process', recalling the interchanges in the early sixteenth century between Bartolomé de Las Casas, who denounced the horrific injustices visited upon the indigenous people by the Spanish conquerors, and the Dominican theologians of Salamanca who formulated the first theories of the international rights of all human beings.

One must not underestimate the cost and complexity of this dialogue between theology and pastoral experience. It did not always work. In 1971 a small group of young friars was despatched to re-found our presence in a working-class parish in Newcastle. The Province was convinced that their progressive preaching and liturgy would be embraced with enthusiasm. Five years later it was deemed to have failed. Richard Finn claims that 'neither those who were sent, nor the parish who received them were well prepared. Two cultures or ways of belonging in the Church partly failed to understand each other and find common cause'.<sup>26</sup>

In the sixties, this conversation between theology and lived experience was carried out not only in the parishes, but at Spode House, which the theologian and Dominican layman Donald Nicholl lauded as the forum 'for worship, study, debate, and, indeed, for virtually all that makes human life together worth-while'.<sup>27</sup> And also in our schools at Llanarth and Laxton and in *New Blackfriars*. Today only the parishes and *New Blackfriars* remain.

How today, with our much-reduced resources, are we to carry on this mission of the evangelisation of culture? Christopher Dawson famously asserted that 'a society which has lost its religion becomes sooner or later a society which has lost its culture'.<sup>28</sup> In some ways our secular society is culturally impoverished, making the task even harder. How can we touch the imagination of our contemporaries? We are blessed with several younger brethren who are musical composers, and the Spode Music Week carries on a lively intellectual conversation between faith and music. How may we preach the gospel in the digital world and speak a nuanced and attractive word in a context which tends to oversimplification? Young British Dogs of the Lord run *Godzdogs*, a wonderful way in for our preaching in the blogosphere. The Torch website offers homilies on the web. The International Dominican Youth Movement, founded in 1996, has taken firm root here and is a new way of reaching the young. How can we reach out to a mass audience which knows nothing of Christianity? In what other ways can we be in touch with the creative spirits of our time, sharing our faith and learning from them too?

<sup>26</sup> Chapter 8.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Nichols p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Religion and Culture* (London, Sheed and Ward, 1948) p. 233.

## Friendship

There is a third element, intimately intertwined with the other two, which sustained the community when it might easily have collapsed: a delight in friendship. According to Aquinas, in Christ we are befriended by God and so the life of grace flowers into friendship with each other. Blessed Jordan of Saxony was said of Dominic that 'since he loved all, he was loved by all'.<sup>29</sup> Jordan himself had a genius for friendship and hesitated to join the Order until he was accompanied by his friend, Henry. Our spirituality is marked by what Simon Tugwell called 'a robust exteriority', strong affection and even sometimes irritation, as when a thirteenth century novice hit the subprior with a large office book!<sup>30</sup>

These early friars were beautifully at ease in friendship with women. The first community founded by Dominic was for women, and for a time it was his home. When he was dying he confessed that he 'has been more excited by the conversation of young women than being talked at by old women'.<sup>31</sup> Blessed Jordan wrote the most beautiful love letters to a Dominican nun, Blessed Diane d'Andalò, overflowing with tenderness. St Catherine of Siena was surrounded by her circle of beloved friends – men and women, old and young, lay and religious – known as the *caterinati*, the Catherine people. They gave each other humorous nicknames and evidently enjoyed laughter and mutual teasing.

This Dominican delight in friendship found a fresh and peculiarly British expression in Bede Jarrett, who wrote of friendship as 'being to me the most beautiful thing on earth'.<sup>32</sup> I wonder how much his understanding of it was derived from the intense male friendships of his all male Jesuit boarding school, Stonyhurst.

This has impacted three areas of our life. First of all, friendship is seen as a normal part of Christian discipleship. 'Friendship is and was practised by the Master whose lesson we try to learn'.<sup>33</sup> We should not be afraid of profound friendships with men and women, religious and lay. Dom Hubert van Zeller, a novice at Downside Abbey, wrote to Bede in alarm when he fell in love with someone known only as P. Bede wrote back: 'I am glad [that you have fallen in love with P] because I think your temptation has always been towards Puritanism,

<sup>29</sup> Jordan, *Libellus* 107, *Monumenta Ordinis Praedicatorum Historica* Vol XVI, (Louvain and Rome, 1896ff) p. 76.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Tugwell OP, *The Way of the Preacher*, (London, Darton Longman and Todd, 1979) p. 94.

<sup>31</sup> Ed. Simon Tugwell OP, *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings*, (Ramsey, Paulist Press, 1982) p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> *Meditations for Layfolk*, (London, Catholic Truth Society, 1941) p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120.

a narrowness, a certain inhumanity. Your tendency was almost towards the denial of the hallowing of matter. You were in love with the Lord but not properly in love with the Incarnation. You were really afraid... You were afraid of life because you wanted to be a saint and because you knew you were an artist. The artist in you saw beauty everywhere; the would-be saint in you said, "My, but that's frightfully dangerous"; the novice in you said "Keep your eyes tight shut"; If P had not come into your life, you might have blown up. I believe P will save your life. I shall say a Mass in thanksgiving for what P has been, and done, to you. You have needed P for a long time. Aunts are no outlet. Nor are stout and elderly Provincials'.<sup>34</sup>

There are risks. Richard Finn notes in his history of the Province how many of the brethren in recent times left to get married. Gerard Vann, in his marvellous preface to the letters of Jordan to Diane, recognises this danger but urges us not to retreat within ourselves. Some people flee friendship for the sake of safety, 'but safety for what? And at what price? In the last resort it is better to run the risk of an occasional scandal than to have a monastery – a refectory, a recreation room – full of dead men. Our Lord did not say that "I am come that ye may have safety, and have it more abundantly". Some of us would indeed give anything to feel safe, about our life in this world as in the next, but we cannot have it both ways: safety or life, we must choose'.<sup>35</sup> Many other religious orders and congregations taught their members to beware of 'particular friendships'. Gervase Mathew, firmly in the Jarrett tradition, told us to be more afraid of 'particular enmities'.

Secondly, there is a particularly British expectation that fraternal relationships within the Order should be open to a mutual warmth and trust. We tend to enjoy each other's company. Brotherhood often leads to friendship. A candidate told me that he was attracted to the Order 'because you seem to like each other'. Jarrett included among the characteristics of friendship: loyalty, constancy, and frankness, which are just what one would hope for from one's brothers. The usual way in which members of the Province sign off letters to each other is with 'love'. It is this friendly fraternity that enabled the province, even in the most difficult moments, to go on talking. It is a constant invitation to transcend narrow identities and delight in differences of conviction. Generous-hearted friendship challenges the pressures of the modern media to seek security in the company of the likeminded.

Thirdly, as with those early Dominicans, friendship reaches out to members of what we now call the Dominican Family. Finn wrote, 'The period from the mid-sixties onwards was marked by a strong sense of

<sup>34</sup> Eds Bede Bailey, Aidan Bellenger and Simon Tugwell, *Letters of Bede Jarrett*, (Bath and Oxford, Downside Abbey and Blackfriars Publications, 1989), p. 189.

<sup>35</sup> *To Heaven with Diana: A Study of Jordan of Saxony and Diana d'Andalò with a Translation of the Letters of Jordan*, (New York etc, iUniverse, Inc, 2006) p. 40.

the friars being just one part of a wider Dominican “family” that embraced the nuns, apostolic sisters, and lay Dominicans’.<sup>36</sup> There is an annual Dominican seminar. There has usually been close collaboration with the sisters in the planning of our missions. When Sister Assunta Kirwan was Prioress General of the Bushey Sisters it would have been unthinkable for any new project to be launched without inviting the collaboration of the wider Dominican Family. Our novices and those of the Stone Dominican Sisters study together. There has been in recent years a renewal of Dominican fraternities who are not only our friends but collaborators in our mission.

### Inculturation or Counter-Cultural?

There is one topic of conversation which never seems to find a final resolution, and nor can it ever: How far does our Dominican vocation demand that we be set apart by monastic observance or should friars be immersed in the culture of our contemporaries? What is the balance between inculturation and the imperative to be counter-cultural? This tension is intrinsic to our faith in the Word who became flesh in a Jewish man, born and raised in the faith of his people, and yet whose clash with the religious and political authorities led to his death outside the city. This tension will always endure in an order which claims to be both contemplative and active, both monastic and itinerant.

Surely Dominic and our earliest brethren debated it as they tramped the roads of Europe and as that first small band of brethren made their way to England and to Oxford eight hundred years ago. This was the tension between Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, who refounded the Province of France in the nineteenth century, and his fellow French Dominican, Alexandre-Vincent Jandel, 73<sup>rd</sup> Master of the Order. Jandel considered Woodchester, then the noviciate of the English Province, a fine model of the strict observance that he championed.

When Bede Jarrett refounded Blackfriars in the heart of Oxford University, many brethren viewed this development with apprehension. When Martin-Stanislas Gillet, then Master of the Order, visited the Province at the end of Bede’s sixteen years as Provincial, he supported those who opposed the transfer of theological studies to Oxford. He wanted Blackfriars be ‘a House of higher Studies – especially historical studies’, presumably in the hope that older and more mature students would be less likely to be led astray. Bede was convinced that a monastic way of life must not impede our response to the pastoral needs of the people of God, especially in the parish houses: ‘Our ideas of religious life with its regular hours etc is a luxury the middle ages did not

<sup>36</sup> Chapter 8.

contemplate in a friar. They wandered preaching over the country. St. Dominic had far less monastic life than I...'.<sup>37</sup>

Ian Hislop, the dour Scottish convert who was Provincial in the throes of the crisis, put the dilemma thus: 'How a group like ours can preserve its integrity under the stresses of contemporary life, and adapt without loss of coherence to a process of accelerating change'.<sup>38</sup> When the brethren were touched by the exuberant freedom of the late sixties, this was the key question as the community of Blackfriars tried to find a way of living the Dominican life that was both authentically religious and yet open to the aspirations of the younger brethren. Cornelius Ernst favoured a stricter observance and even once at Hawkesyard refused to teach the Dominican students because they did not seem committed to religious life,<sup>39</sup> whereas Herbert McCabe sat more loosely to regular observance, especially when the pubs were open.

During the late sixties, the dominant movement was towards a life that was less monastic, with more permeable boundaries between the religious life and the secular world. The cloister, excluding women from the refectory and one's room, was abolished. Compline ceased to be celebrated communally since in the evening one would often be out with friends and, it was hoped, sharing one's faith. Outside the priory, the habit was rarely worn, and, with a show of individual freedom, we all donned black polo necks and blue jeans. In France, as usual way ahead of us and far more radical, some of the brethren had already in the fifties, applied for jobs in factories and sought to immerse themselves in the life of the working classes.

Soon, as always, a reaction began within the Province and younger brethren sought to re-establish a rather more classical form of religious life. Some looked to the community in Edinburgh to embody this. Richard Finn wrote: 'The establishment of a second noviciate at Edinburgh in 1980 may be considered both as a step towards a stronger distinct identity for the Scottish houses of the Province, and as an attempt to offer a different style of noviciate. The Novice Masters appointed and re-appointed in 1982 and 1983, Herbert McCabe and John Farrell, belonged to different generations and favoured different styles of community life, public ministry, and religious formation'.<sup>40</sup>

Yet despite these fluctuations in our understanding of the religious life, at no time did the brethren adopt either an extreme observance or lose an identifiably religious way of life. A French Dominican visiting in the eighties exclaimed, 'I do not understand you English Dominicans: you wear the habit and sometimes sing in Latin and yet you seem to be politically left-wing and go on demonstrations. Who are you?'

<sup>37</sup> Quoted by Finn, Chapter 7.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted Finn, Chapter 8.

<sup>39</sup> Finn, *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

This resistance to easy categorisation helps us even now to welcome new brothers whose expectations differ from previous generations. It is key that the habit never became symbolic of a ‘party’ since it is the sign of our fraternity whether worn more or less often.

The same debate about the balance between a more monastic life and immersion in the culture of our contemporaries continues today in our province, and probably in every province of the Order. The boundaries between the religious life and the secular world become more or less porous, shifting backwards and forwards, like the tide rising and falling. But we go on talking, refusing to fall into an entrenched opposition between the more observant and the less monastically inclined.

### The Rejection of War

There is a last thread in the recent history of the Province that should be mentioned briefly, not accepted by all but neither vocally opposed by any, to the best of my knowledge: the rejection by some brethren in every generation during at least the last eighty years of warfare. Gerard Vann wrote in 1939, ‘Modern warfare is purely and exclusively destructive of everything that is good in our world’.<sup>41</sup> A year later Victor White was equally adamant that ‘we should prefer even national humiliation, defeat and foreign domination itself to a war which is morally evil and contrary to the law of God in its end or its methods or its moral circumstances’.<sup>42</sup>

In the 1950s ‘Peace and War’ Conferences were held in Spode House and Aquinas Hall in London. Finn recounts how Simon Blake OP became a major figure in the peace movement. He ‘took part in a Peace Walk to Canterbury in June 1965, another such walk from Southwark to Canterbury in the summer of 1966, and that same year became chair of CCND [The Christian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament]. He also led a walk for peace in Vietnam from the Aquinas Centre to St Paul’s Cathedral, when his photograph appeared on the front page of the *Times*. He undertook a much longer pilgrimage for disarmament in 1967 from Southwark to Blackfriars, Oxford. The year after that he played a prominent role in an event at Porton Down, described by the London Priory chronicler as a ‘C.N.D anti germ warfare pray in’.<sup>43</sup>

Later, brethren and other members of the Dominican Family took part in demonstrations in favour of nuclear disarmament, and against the Falkland and Iraqi wars, and practiced civil disobedience. There was a Peace Preaching course at Blackfriars in the 1980s, to form

<sup>41</sup> *Common Sense, Christianity and War* (London, James Clarke and Co, 1939) p. 8.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Catholics and War. The Principles involved’, in *The Catholic Herald*, May 1<sup>st</sup> 1940, quoted by Nichols p. 56.

<sup>43</sup> Finn, chapter 8.

members of the Dominican Family to preach opposition to war, and a new branch of the Family, Dominican Peace Action,<sup>44</sup> was formed to collaborate with the Peace Movement. How will this tradition be fostered by our province today, in which warfare is evolving new forms?

All these elements of the life of our Province have come to form a recognisable breed of the Dogs of the Lord. It has enabled us to live through the profound crisis of the mid-sixties and if not exactly yet thrive, do much more than merely survive. It has helped us to resist the fractures of the culture wars. If we keep on praying to the Lord, studying the Word of God, abiding by our rich and spacious theological tradition, and talking to each other, who knows what blessings may lie ahead?

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<sup>44</sup> C.f. Finn, chapter 8.