

Facing the Challenges to Faith in Christ Today: The Dominican Way

✠J. Augustine Di Noia, O.P.
Titular Archbishop of Oregon City
Secretary, Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments
Yale Club, New York, 2 June 2010

Introduction

Of the many challenges to faith in Christ today, I want to consider this evening three of what I believe to be the biggest: what it means to call Christ the Savior, what it means to be authentically human, and what it means to be moral. I want to offer you some understanding of the nature of these challenges, and at the same time to exemplify something of the way of approaching them that has evolved within the Dominican tradition of theology and spirituality.

Dominicans love to tell the story of how St. Dominic spent the whole night in conversation with an innkeeper in order to dissuade him from his Albigensian errors—an instance of what Pope Benedict recently called “intellectual charity.” The Holy Father devoted a Wednesday catechesis to the vocation of the Franciscans and Dominicans who “were not only witnesses but also teachers.” There was a “widespread need in their time for religious instruction. Many of the lay faithful who dwelled in rapidly expanding cities wanted to live an intensely spiritual Christian life. They therefore sought to deepen their knowledge of the faith and to be guided in the demanding but exciting path of holiness” (Benedict XVI 2010a, 11). The Pope went on to say that “Today too a ‘charity of and in the truth’ exists, an ‘intellectual charity’ that must be exercised to enlighten minds and to combine faith with culture.

“The dedication of the Franciscans and Dominicans in the medieval universities is an invitation...to make ourselves present in the places where knowledge is tempered so as to focus the light of the Gospel, with respect and conviction, on the fundamental questions that concern Man, his dignity and his eternal destiny” (ibid., 12).

The intellectual charity, of which Pope Benedict speaks, requires that we take seriously the intellectual challenges and questions people pose in their struggle to understand their Catholic faith. When the challenges are at least in part intellectual, when issues of the correct meaning of Catholic faith are involved, when misunderstandings of what it is that the Church proposes can block the way to the encounter with the living God, or to faith in Christ, or to participation in the liturgical worship of the Church, or to a life of faithful discipleship, and so on—in these situations, we need to engage the questions people have and reason through them in a serious way.

St. Thomas Aquinas tried so hard to understand positions with which he did not agree that he was said to be able to formulate them more forcefully than their proponents could. Only then did he set out to respond to them. This is what I mean by taking the intellectual challenges to faith seriously.

Our reasoning has to be based on solid theological principles and to operate within a vision of the Catholic faith in its integrity and interconnectedness. There needs to be an active grasp of the fundamental intelligibility of faith—the truth about God is luminous, and endlessly so, and the difficulties lie more in the weakness of our capacities than in the alleged obscurity of divine revelation.

St. Dominic understood this and demanded that study have a central place in the formation and life of his friars. In a subsequent Wednesday catechesis devoted to St. Dominic, Pope Benedict observed that “with a courageous gesture, Dominic wanted his followers to acquire a sound theological training and did not hesitate to send them to the universities of the time....The Constitutions of the Order of Preachers give great importance to study as a preparation for the apostolate. Dominic wanted his Friars to devote themselves to it without reserve, with diligence and with piety” (Benedict XVI 2010 b, 11).

This intellectual charity is deeply embedded in the Dominican heart. “Dominic, who wished to found a religious Order of theologian-preachers, reminds us that theology has a spiritual and pastoral dimension that enriches the soul and life.... [T]he motto of the Friars Preachers—*contemplata aliis tradere*—helps us to discover a pastoral yearning in the contemplative study of this truth because of the need to communicate to others the fruit of one’s own contemplation” (ibid.).

In addition to the mission to convert the Albigensians (which he received from the pope) and the mission *ad gentes* (to those who do not yet know Jesus), St. Dominic embraced “the mission to those who lived in the cities, especially the university cities where the new intellectual trends were a challenge to the faith of the cultured” (ibid.). In order to do this effectively, we have to avoid the temptation to fudge—to adapt the Catholic faith so as to make it palatable to modern tastes and expectations. This so-called “accommodationist” approach generally fails. There is a risk in this approach that the Christian message becomes indistinguishable from everything else on offer in the market stalls of secularized religious faith: “In the powerful yet soft secularising

totalitarianism of distinctively modern culture, our greatest enemy is...the Church's 'own internal secularisation' which, when it occurs, does so through the '...largely unconscious' adoption of the 'ideas and practices' of seemingly 'benign adversaries'" (Nichols 2008, 141). Facing the challenges to faith demands a robust sort of reasoning. No one in his or her right mind will be interested in a faith about which its exponents seem too embarrassed to communicate forthrightly. We have to be convinced that the fullness of the truth and beauty of the message about Jesus Christ is powerfully attractive when it is communicated without apologies or compromise.

Why we need the Savior who is not just any savior

The first challenge concerns Jesus Christ himself. The most fundamental and prevalent misunderstanding of the Catholic faith that we face today is the notion that it is arrogant to claim that Jesus Christ is the unique mediator of salvation. To ascribe a uniquely salvific role to Jesus Christ seems to constitute a denial of the salvific role of other religious founders and thus could be an affront to their communities. The origins of this difficulty lie deep in the mentality of post-Enlightenment modernity and its multifarious theological progeny. According to this mentality, all religions express some experience of the absolute or ultimate or transcendent reality—however it is named and described—that encompasses worldly existence. No religion can claim to possess a privileged description of a reality incomprehensible and ineffable to all equally, nor to afford unique access to a realm in principle available to all equally. We might call this mentality and the religious outlook it fosters *the culture of pluralism*.

In order to confront this challenge, we need in the first place to make clear that our faith in Christ's uniqueness does not entail a devaluation of the world's religions. The religions of the world are monuments to the human search for God. As such, they are worthy of respect and study because of the immense cultural richness of their witness to the desire for God planted in every human heart.

But the Christian faith attests not only to the human search for God, but principally to God's search for us. And what God wants to share with us is nothing less than a communion of life, a share or participation in the divine trinitarian life. This is the basic starting point for understanding the unique role of Jesus Christ in the salvation of the human race. For the idea that God wants to share the communion of his life with persons who are not God cannot come from anyone but God himself. The initiative here comes from God's side, both to reconcile us because of sin and to make possible a kind of life that would not only be impossible for us but unthinkable as well.

Salvation in this comprehensive sense is not something that can be arranged or organized by human beings. It cannot come from the created order, for the created order has neither the resources to achieve nor the imagination to conceive such a destiny for human persons.

Arians, neo-Arians and their fellow travelers throughout history are willing to acknowledge that Jesus is a savior but then it seems that "salvation is nothing more than a minor adjustment internal to the contingent order. Salvation is something that one creature performs in relation to others" (Torrance 2001, 57).

Given that salvation in the Christian sense of the term involves both reconciliation of sinners and the elevation of creaturely persons to a new kind of life, it cannot come from within this world. Saviors are a dime a dozen when one fails to grasp what's really at stake. We need to be delivered not just from error, or suffering, or desire, or injustice, or poverty. To understand what the Christian faith means and promises by salvation, we must grasp the peril of the human condition as well as the glory that is human destiny in the economy of salvation.

God desires nothing less than to share his life with us. If the salvation that the triune God wills for the entire human race entails communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then the creaturely and sinful obstacles to this communion must be overcome. It has never been claimed of anyone but Jesus Christ that he could and did overcome these obstacles, and that he could and did make us sharers in his divine life. Through him we are both healed of sin and raised to an adoptive participation in the life of the Blessed Trinity—and nothing less.

The obstacles to this participation are either overcome or not. If they are not overcome, then Christians have nothing for which to hope, for themselves or for others. In that case, they will hawk an empty universal salvation on the highways of the world. If Christians abandon the proclamation of Christ's unique mediatorship as the divine, only-begotten Son of the Father, they will have no other mediatorship with which to replace it. We need the Savior who is not just any savior.

How persons who are not now explicit believers in Christ can actually come to share in the salvation that God desires for the human race and that Christ alone makes possible is too large a topic for this evening's paper.

But if Christians—in the wholly admirable desire to be respectful of non-believers—no longer confess Christ’s unique mediatorship in making ultimate communion with the Blessed Trinity a real possibility for created persons, then the problem of how non-Christians can share in it is not resolved: it simply evaporates. For Christians to have a truly universal hope and confidence in the salvation of persons who are not Christians, they have to affirm the unique role of Christ in bringing this salvation about, not just for Christians but for others as well.

Why we need Christ to become authentically human

A second challenge concerns what it means to be human. Here the fundamental misunderstanding that blocks the path of many people is shaped by what has been called the *culture of authenticity*. This is the idea that somehow being a Christian involves giving up or suppressing what is uniquely human in each one of us and accepting an external criterion or measure which is alien to one’s true self.

Like the aforementioned culture of pluralism, the supporting matrix of ideas behind this sense that “each of us has an original way of being human” (Taylor 1992, 28) is an ingrained feature of modernity and penetrates popular culture at every level. Though it appears to be a form of moral relativism, this expressive individualism actually functions as a kind of moral ideal for many people: “[T]he soft relativism that seems to accompany the ethic of authenticity [asserts]: let each person do their own thing....One shouldn’t criticise the others’ values, because they have a right to live their own life as you do. The sin which is not tolerated is intolerance” (Taylor 2007, 484).

Not only is it immoral to be intolerant of the values of others. It is immoral to allow the “authority” of some extrinsic measure to displace one’s authentic self. Fundamental to this “moral ideal” is the understanding “that each of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious and political authority” (Taylor 2007, 475).

These ideas pose a considerable challenge to a true understanding of what Christian discipleship really entails for every human being. In response, the first thing that needs to be affirmed follows directly from Christ’s unique mediatorship. To become sharers in the communion of divine life, we must become like the Son so that the Father sees and loves in us what he sees and loves in Christ. We become conformed to Christ in order to be “at home” in the shared life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But the conformation to Christ that is the principle of our transformation is not a slavish conformity to a model but the realization of our distinctive and unique personal identity. This must be so for otherwise the communion with the Blessed Trinity to which this transformation is ordered could not be achieved. The image of God in us consists precisely in the spiritual capacities of knowing and loving that make interpersonal communion possible. To claim—as does expressive individualism—that each person has an original way of being human is not to deny that each person shares a human nature which can be described as ensouled bodiliness and is characterized by a range of capacities, including the capacities to know and love other persons.

In the Christian understanding, authentic interpersonal communion presupposes the full realization, not the absorption or suppression, of the individual persons who enter into it. Thus, if Christ is to be the pattern for the transformation accomplished in us by the Holy Spirit, it can only mean that in being conformed to him, we each discover and realize our unique identities as persons. This is an immense and almost astonishing claim.

“If a man wants to be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his life? Or what will he give in return for his life?” (Matthew 16:24-26). Here Christ asserts, in effect, that each person will find his or her true self only by being conformed to Him.

In ordinary experience, this would be an outrageous thing to say. None of us, whether as teachers or parents or pastors—no matter how inflated our conceptions of ourselves or how confident our sense of our abilities—would ever dare to say to anyone in our charge that they will find their true selves only by imitating us. Yet this is precisely what Christ asserts. In effect this means that an indefinite number of persons will realize their distinctive identities by being conformed to Christ. Only the Son of God could make such a claim on us. Only the perfect image of God who is the Person of the Son could constitute the principle and pattern for the transformation and fulfillment of every human person who has ever lived. The more we are conformed to his image, the more authentically do we become our true selves.

Pope Benedict made this point in the stirring peroration to his sermon at the inauguration of his pontificate: “If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation.”

Why the moral law is good for us

The third challenge I want to consider concerns the moral life. It is the idea that the moral law is a more or less arbitrary constraint in which certain things are permitted and certain things are forbidden, irrespective of the bearing of these injunctions on human goodness and flourishing.

This idea has a very long history stretching back to the nominalist moral theology that took hold in the fourteenth century and has remained influential ever since. It served to foster what came to be regarded and experienced as a *culture of legalism* in Catholic moral theology that was decisively rejected by the Magisterium in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*.

A legalist perspective on the moral life creates a significant challenge to authentic Christian existence. Following the lead of *Veritatis Splendor*, it is of critical importance in addressing this challenge to insist on the priority of the categories of good and evil for assessing the rightness and wrongness of particular actions.

Legalistic moral systems insist or at least imply that actions are good (and thus right) because permitted, and bad (and thus wrong) because forbidden.

But authentic Catholic moral teaching maintains that a certain course of action is forbidden and wrong because it is *bad* for the agent, while another course of action is permitted and right because it is *good* for the agent. The commandments do not simply lay down requirements that are indifferent *vis a vis* their impact on human goodness and happiness.

In legalistic moral doctrine, the principal virtue is obedience: one obeys the commandments, whatever the content, because they are enjoined by God. In classic Catholic moral theology, the observance of the commandments is meant to foster the specific virtues with which they are concerned and thus the overall good of the human moral agent. In other words, the commandments of the moral law treat primarily of good and evil rather than of the permitted and the forbidden. They thus express an order established by divine wisdom—as St. Thomas Aquinas insisted—in which the moral law accords with the divinely created finalities of human nature and is given to make human beings good and virtuous.

To use an analogy of which St. Paul might approve, the commandments are more like an athlete's daily exercise and diet regime than they are like the traffic laws. Traffic regulations require that we stop on red and go on green, but it could just as well be the other way around. But the athlete follows the daily regime enjoined by his or her coach in order to achieve and maintain a certain level of performance otherwise unattainable. There is a fit between the regime and the results. The moral law is like that. It contains non-arbitrary injunctions that guide us steadily toward the good in every action and thus toward our ultimate Good.

At this point, we might turn to St. Augustine, and particularly to his *Confessions*, to understand what is involved in this authentically Catholic understanding of the moral law. St. Augustine frequently invites his readers to consider the things that they have desired and the things that they desire now—to consider, in effect, the experience of desire.

When we have thought about things that we have desired and sought, St. Augustine asks us to acknowledge that, in the end, we have often lost interest and become bored with these very things, and that we then move on to seeking other things. For St. Augustine, this observation is not so much a cause for lament as it is an occasion of insight. In pondering the experience of desire, we learn something very important about ourselves: no good thing that we have wanted and even possessed can finally quench desire itself, because we are made for the uncreated Good which is God himself in whom our desire finally rests.

This means, of course, that the good things of this world—and all the more so, the good of other persons—far from being obstacles in our quest for ultimate happiness, point us to the Good itself which is their source and in which they share. If we do not love the good things of this world, how shall we be able to love their Maker? The triune God, who made us for himself and who wants to share the communion of trinitarian love with us, uses the good things of this world to lead us to him who is, we could say, Goodness itself. The danger—and, sometimes, the tragedy—of human existence is to desire and love the created good as if it were divine, to invest an absolute value in what cannot finally satisfy the human heart.

There is always the possibility that we will hang our hearts on things that cannot bear the weight. That is what sin is. But—through the guidance of the moral law and the assistance of divine grace—rightly ordered desire and love of the good things of this world and the good of other persons is already a participation in the Good which is God himself. These lessons from St. Augustine help us to grasp a point that Pope Benedict makes in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*.

There we learn that *eros* is meant to lead us to *agape*, to the love of God and to the love of one another in God. Pope Benedict resists absolutely the misreading, sometimes perverse, that claims to see in Christian faith the suppression of the ordinary fulfillments of human earthly life, particularly human intimacy and love, in favor of a good beyond life. On the contrary, for Christian faith the whole range of human desire—or, to use more technical language, the inclination to the good embedded in the very structure of human existence—finds its complete fulfillment in the love of the triune God, and nothing less. Although Pope Benedict does not use this expression in the encyclical, we might call this unity of and continuity between *eros* and *agape* “the sanctification of desire.” It is to this end that the moral law directs us.

* * *

Not all challenges to faith are intellectual in nature, of course, but this evening we have been considering the sorts of challenges that can be reasoned through. In particular, we considered some specific intellectual challenges that people may face in understanding their Catholic faith today.

We have seen something of the nature of these challenges as well as something of the Dominican way of approaching them.

St. Bernard used to say that the mysteries demand worship not scrutiny. Dominicans would certainly agree, but they are inclined to add that scrutiny can be a form of worship.

Moreover, they resist the temptation to cry “it’s a mystery” prematurely. Sometimes the response “it’s a mystery” is just a cover for theological ignorance on the part of people who should know better. In our conversations with those who have questions about the Catholic faith, it is a mistake to cry “mystery” when some explanation is available and needed. In this way, we can help them to encounter Christ, “the most precious good that the men and women of every time and every place have the right to know and love!” (Benedict XVI 2010 b, 11).

To know and *love*. In the end, love has a critical role to play in the resolution of the intellectual challenges to faith today. As St. Augustine beautifully put it: “For that cannot be loved that is altogether unknown. But when what is known, in however small a measure, is also loved, by the same love, one is led on to a better and fuller knowledge. If, then, you grow in the love that the Holy Spirit spreads abroad in your hearts, He will teach you all truth....So shall the result be, that not from outward teachers will you learn those things...but you will be taught by God, so that the very things that you have learned and believed by means of lessons and sermons supplied from without...your minds themselves may have the power to perceive” (Elowsky 2007, 205).

Bibliography

Pope Benedict XVI 2010a "Friars' Lives of Poverty Make Their Preaching Credible: General Audience Catechesis on the Franciscan and Dominican Orders in the Middle Ages," *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition (20 January 2010), 11-12.

(2010b) "Cultivating the Cultural Dimension of Faith: General Audience Catechesis on St. Dominic," *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition (10 February 2010), 11-12.

* * * * *

Joel C. Elowsky, ed. 2007. St. Augustine, "Tractates on the Gospel of John 96.4," in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament 14b John 11-21* Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press.

Aidan Nichols, OP 2008. *The Realm: An Unfashionable Essay on the Conversion of England*. Oxford: Family Publications.

Charles Taylor 1992. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Charles Taylor 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Alan Torrance 2001. "Being of One Substance with The Father," in C. R. Seitz, ed. *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, 49-61. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press.